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CR Consumer Reports®
OCTOBER 2024

**RATINGS & REVIEWS**
- Mattresses
- Toaster Ovens
- Refrigerators
- Garbage Bags
- Flooring
- Frying Pans

# THE SAFEST CARS YOU CAN BUY

**These vehicles (plus more inside) have all the features that will protect you on the road.**

▲ FROM LEFT: HYUNDAI IONIQ 6, HONDA ACCORD HYBRID, KIA TELLURIDE, TOYOTA PRIUS & MAZDA CX-30

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By Consumer Reports

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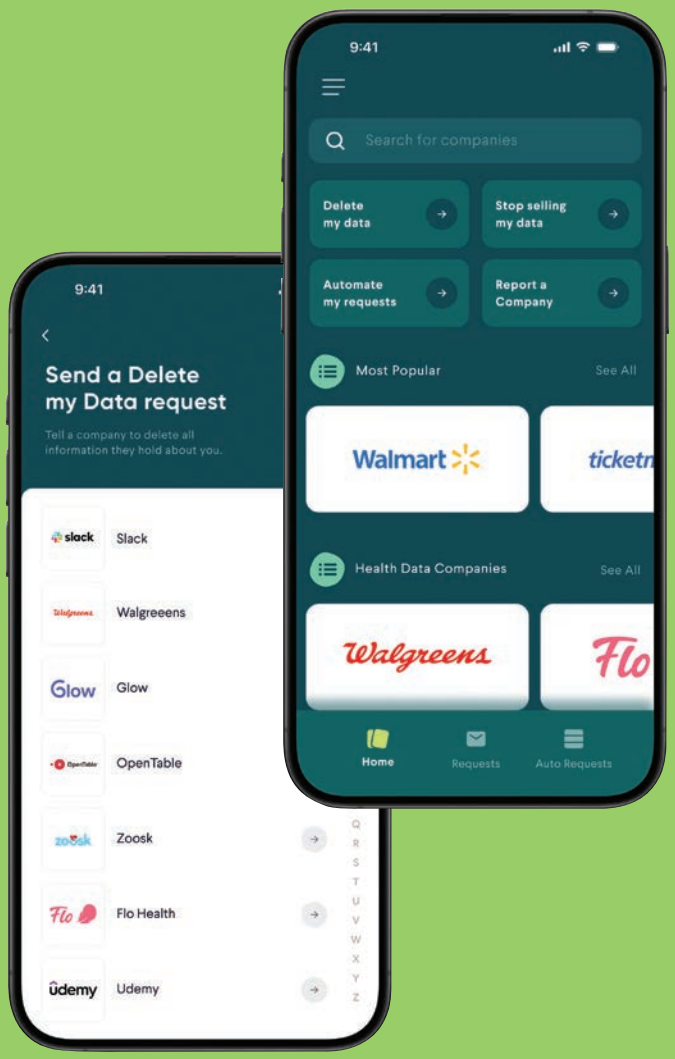


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PHOTO ILLUSTRATION (TOP): ERIC HEINTZ; PHOTO: TOYOTA; SUBARU (CARS)

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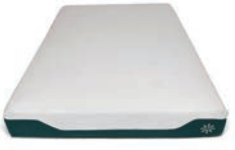


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PHOTOS: JOHN POWERS/CONSUMER REPORTS (HYUNDAI); CARAWAY (PAN)

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**RATINGS** Overall Scores are based on a scale of 0 to 100. We rate products using these symbols:

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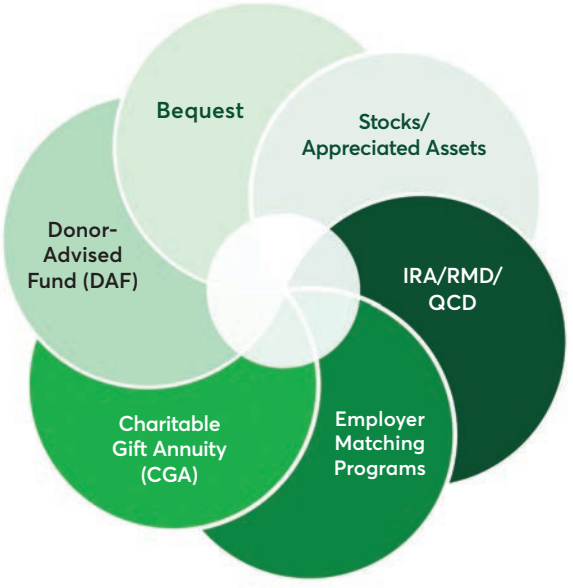


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# A Lifesaving Victory

SINCE OUR FOUNDING, CR has sought to improve the level of safety in our cars, including working to make features like seat belts and backup cameras standard.

We've built on this legacy by pushing the marketplace toward automatic emergency braking (AEB) with pedestrian detection, because pedestrian deaths have shot up in recent years, topping 7,500 in 2022. In fact, since 2020, CR has required all cars we've chosen as our Top Picks to have this technology. (You can find our list of the safest cars right now in our cover story, on page 46.)

We are also fighting for more advanced AEB systems that can detect pedestrians at night. Last year, more than 24,000 consumers joined us in calling on the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to set strong federal AEB standards. In a victory for consumers, NHTSA has announced that, starting in 2029, all new cars must have this lifesaving feature. It's an enormous win that's expected to save hundreds of lives and prevent tens of thousands of injuries each year.

Lobbyists representing automakers are pushing back, claiming that complying with this new rule is "practically impossible." But at least one inexpensive model on the market already meets it, according to NHTSA: the 2023 Toyota Corolla Hybrid. CR will fight all attempts to weaken the new standard or put off meeting it by 2029. Your safety is our priority. This technology belongs in every new car.

Marta Tellado

**Marta L. Tellado,**
**President and CEO**
Follow me on Twitter
**@MLTellado**

The Consumer Reports 2024 Annual Meeting will be held online on Oct. 16, 2024. If you are a paid member of CR, please go to **CR.org/annualmeeting** for registration information and watch your email for an electronic ballot to vote on the current CR Board of Directors slate. If you haven't provided your email address, you can do so by calling us at 800-333-0663 or by going to **CR.org/myaccount**.

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PHOTO: VICTORIA WILL

# Fighting for Consumers

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a 40-year-old legal doctrine known as the "Chevron deference," in a ruling that many consumer advocates fear will make it harder for federal agencies to protect the public.

The doctrine was established by a 1984 decision in a case between the namesake energy giant and the environmental nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council. It said courts must defer to federal agencies over the interpretation of laws if Congress was ambiguous about the exact issue in question and if the agency interpretations are reasonable. At that time, the court explained that federal agencies are better equipped than judges are with the expertise needed to make highly technical policy decisions. The federal government routinely relies on agency experts to make decisions about how best to implement laws concerning product safety, financial fairness, public health, and more.

Experts expect the ruling to have a profound ripple effect because it may embolden companies to challenge regulations and empower judges to overrule federal agencies. They also worry that it will reduce accountability and increase partisanship in the system of federal regulations meant to protect Americans.

CR is now calling on Congress to pass legislation that firmly establishes the authority of regulatory agencies to interpret the laws they oversee, and to enforce the consumer and safety protections they have established. You can support these efforts by signing our petition at **CR.org/chevronruling**.

**18,000**

**Approximate number of times federal courts have cited the Chevron decision since 1984.**

SOURCE: CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE

## ACTION UPDATE

In June, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau finalized a CR-backed rule to establish a registry of companies that break consumer laws. The registry will help the CFPB and law enforcement agencies identify repeat offenders who try to restart scams or fraud, or engage in other illegal activity after being sanctioned. The bureau also hopes the registry, when available, will be used as a research tool by potential customers and investors when they consider doing business with a financial company. Consumers can submit complaints about financial services at cfpb.gov/complaint.

# Making Kids' Food Safer

**WHAT'S AT STAKE**

Getting children to eat their vegetables is notoriously difficult. So some parents turn to veggie puffs, a popular kind of snack that contains ingredients like carrots and beets. One manufacturer says its puffs will make kids "actually get excited" about vegetables.

The main ingredient in some of these products is cassava, a starchy root that appeals to some families trying to avoid grains such as rice. Unfortunately, some cassava-based products contain high levels of lead—a concern brought to CR's attention by Tamara Rubin, the owner of Lead Safe Mama, a company focused on preventing lead poisoning.

**WHAT CR IS DOING ABOUT IT**

We decided to test four cassava puff products—two made by LesserEvil and two by Serenity Kids. The results were alarming: Both LesserEvil products and one Serenity Kids product contained concerning amounts of lead. LesserEvil's Lil' Puffs Intergalactic Voyager Veggie Blend puffs had more lead per serving than any of the 80 baby foods CR has tested since 2017.

CR quickly launched a petition calling on the Food and Drug Administration to set limits on lead in food for young children. The FDA has since assured CR of its commitment to removing products with high levels of lead from the marketplace. And on June 13, LesserEvil said it would phase out the use of cassava flour in its Lil' Puffs line of products.

**WHAT YOU CAN DO**

Learn more about CR's cassava testing, and how to keep your children safe from the dangers of heavy metals in food, at **CR.org/cassavatests**.

**ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN RITTER**

THE DANGER IN YOUR
DUST
What's floating in your home's air could be harmful to your health. Here's how to keep your place clean—and
THE MOST COMFORTABLE CARS
BIG SUPERMARKET SAVINGS
HOW TO AVOID INTERNET SCAMS
CR Consumer Reports
The Danger in Your DUST
PESTICIDES. PFAS. LEAD.
What's in your home's air can make you sick. INSIDE: The top-rated tools that'll help keep your place safe.

Our August 2024 cover story, **"The Danger in Your Dust,"** reported on the harmful particles that can lurk in your home's air and offered dust-control strategies. Readers offered their thoughts and questions. To add yours, head to **CR.org/dangerousdust**.

IN THE AUGUST ARTICLE "The Danger in Your Dust," I did not see "cleaning your ducts" as an option to reduce dust. [Can doing that help?]
*–Beverly Graham, Ottawa, IL*

**EDITOR'S NOTE** *According to the Environmental Protection Agency, "duct cleaning has never been shown to actually prevent health problems." Research also has not shown that dust is higher inside homes with dirty air ducts, because much of that dirt stays in the ducts, according to the agency. The EPA advises that some people in extreme situations (such as when there's a mold problem) might want to have their air ducts cleaned. If you hire a company to do the work, make sure it's a member of the National Air Duct Cleaners Association by going to nadca.com to check. And be wary of chemical treatments and unsubstantiated claims about potential health benefits.*

IN "THE DANGER in Your Dust," you recommend using a microfiber or polypropylene duster to clean regularly, and suggest the Swiffer Microfiber Duster Starter Kit as one possible option. However, aren't microfiber and polypropylene dusters made of the very substances you are telling consumers to avoid, including microplastics and nanoplastics?
*–Barbara Arrighi, San Diego*

**EDITOR'S NOTE** *You're right that polypropylene dusters are made from plastic and might shed some particles while you're using them to clean the surfaces in your home. But they work better than dusters made from feathers or lambswool. And while it's good to limit the use of plastic as much as possible, it's not necessary–or even possible–to avoid it completely.*

WRITE

Go to CR.org/lettertoeditor to share your comments for publication.

## STORE LOYALTY PROGRAMS

REGARDING YOUR AUGUST article "Save Big at the Supermarket": How much are customers who pay with cash subsidizing loyalty programs, which require owning expensive phones that can cost hundreds of dollars to buy–plus hundreds more annually for service? I've seen some products that are nearly half the price for those privileged to use [a digital discount]. Doesn't this come at a cost for the rest of us?
*–Terry Lamphier, Grass Valley, CA*

**EDITOR'S NOTE** *Shoppers who pay with cash or don't use loyalty programs are typically not subsidizing those who do. Most sales and discounts offered at grocery stores are the result of negotiations between the store and manufacturers that use promotions to introduce new products or bolster sales. It is true, however, that in many cases, shoppers with access to smartphones can get the most savings. At least one retailer told us it's looking for ways to close that access gap. Stop & Shop is testing a program that allows shoppers without smartphones to get digital coupons at in-store kiosks. In the meantime, there's a work-around–and it's one that's effective in many stores right now. Enroll in the store's loyalty program in person (you'll usually be given a physical card or key tag with your account information). Then, before you head to the grocery store, go to the retailer's website and add digital coupons to your account. After shopping, present the card, key tag, or phone number associated with your account at checkout and the digital savings will be yours.*

## FUNERAL COSTS

IN "THE LAST GOODBYE: Best New Ways to Plan a Funeral" in the August issue, I was appalled to see the average price of cremation from the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA). I wonder if it's an inflated price to diminish sticker shock from overpriced cremation companies. I am a hospice social worker in San Diego, arguably one of the most expensive cities in the country. It doesn't cost nearly that much to die here! Our resources include one for basic cremation that comes in under $800, transportation included. Several others are only a few hundred dollars more. There are [also] reputable places where one can donate remains for research and education.
*– Lorrie Herzberg, San Diego*

**EDITOR'S NOTE** *The NFDA, which gathers price information from members nationwide, includes more than cremation in the $6,280 median price it cited. It also includes the use of a funeral home and its staff for a viewing and funeral. Each service carries a cost, and prices vary by location. For instance, the median price cited for cremation with a viewing and funeral in Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington State is $5,812, while it's as much as $7,000 elsewhere. We also noted that consumers might see ads for cremation services that are much less expensive. Some states and counties offer assistance with final expenses for those who need it, often through local health departments.*

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## TRAVEL PLANNING

"GOING ABROAD? Get Passports (and More) Fast" in the August issue appears to have incorrect information [on applying for travel authorization]. The website of the European Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS) says it is not accepting applications.
*–Stanley J Mitchell, Sarasota, FL*

**EDITOR'S NOTE** *That's correct. As we noted in the article, the program requiring Americans to apply to ETIAS before traveling to certain European countries will begin in 2025. (The specific date has not been made available to the public yet.) So the application system is not yet operational. We suggest that travelers planning to visit Europe next year go to etias.com periodically to check for updated information.*

## GETTING COLORED GROUT CLEAN

Are the products included in the August article "Get Your Tiles and Grout Really Clean" okay to use with gray grout?
*—Catherine Fishback, Fredericksburg, VA*

**EDITOR'S NOTE**
*Cleen-eez Grout-eez Tile & Grout Cleaner and Black Diamond Ultimate Grout Cleaner are safe for use on white and colored grout, according to their manufacturers. Another effective product we tested, Zep Grout Cleaner and Brightener, is also safe for colored grout, its manufacturer says. But it's a powerful, acidic product that requires very careful application—and has a strong chemical smell. People with respiratory problems shouldn't use it.*

## VALUE-PRICED PRODUCTS

REGARDING "Product Spotlight: Cordless Drills" in the August issue: I feel that too often your reviews ignore inexpensive products that provide reasonably good service and value for the average consumer. For example, I purchased an 18-volt drill, including battery and charger, from Harbor Freight over five years ago for around $20. It has served my wife and me well for normal household use and is still going strong. This drill is not "contractor grade," but many consumers (per my observations) use their drills only a few times a year for tasks like hanging pictures or assembling things and do not need that level of function.
*–Jan Pendergast, Brockton, MA*

**EDITOR'S NOTE** *We hear you! Drills are unique in that they're fairly simple tools, but in many cases, the best models are better simply because they use more powerful (and pricier) motors. As a result, many of the top models in our tests are also the most expensive. We did include a lower-priced model in the article (the Skil DL529002, $80, a CR Smart Buy). You can always look for the CR Smart Buy symbol $ to find recommended products that offer top performance at a lower cost. As you note, Harbor Freight makes some tools that offer great value. For example, while the Warrior 64118 18-volt cordless drill doesn't perform quite well enough to earn a top score (it's near the middle of our ratings, with a score of 58), it's plenty capable for casual users, with respectable marks for power and speed, all for $30.*

**ILLUSTRATION BY JASON SCHNEIDER**

# What We're Testing in Our Labs ...

*In our 63 labs, we continually review and rate products. Here, timely picks for this month.*

## WiFi Extenders

**WE TESTED:** 13 models
**WE TEST FOR:** How easy it is to set up, the internet speed it offers up to 55 feet away from the router, and more.

**ABOUT THE SCORES:**
Median: 72
Range: 29-92

BEST OVERALL
**Netgear AX1800 (EAX15)**
$100

92 OVERALL SCORE

EASY TO SET UP
**TP-LINK AX3000 (RE705X)**
$130

89 OVERALL SCORE

GOOD VALUE
**TP-LINK AX1500 (RE505X)**
$60

87 OVERALL SCORE

## French-Door Refrigerators

**WE TESTED:** 95 models
**WE TEST FOR:** Uniformity of temperature inside the fridge, how energy-efficient and quiet it is, how spacious the interior is, and more.

**ABOUT THE SCORES:**
Median: 69
Range: 47-78

LARGE CAPACITY & WIFI-CAPABLE
**LG LRFS28XBS**
$1,800

78 OVERALL SCORE

ENERGY-EFFICIENT
**GE GNE25JYKFS**
$1,900

74 OVERALL SCORE

NARROW FOR SMALL SPACES
**Haier QJS15HYRFS**
$1,600

68 OVERALL SCORE

Ask Our Experts

## How long will my fridge keep food cold during a power outage?

AN UNPOWERED REFRIGERATOR can keep food at a safe temperature—that is, below 40° F—for about 4 hours if the door stays closed. After that, most items can spend 2 more hours above 40° F before becoming unsafe to eat. If a storm is in the forecast and you don't have a generator, move as much food as you can into the freezer, where it stays cold longer. A full freezer will keep food cold for about 48 hours after power is lost; a half-full freezer lasts about 24 hours. If you have a cooler, adding 5 pounds of dry ice (following the instructions on the bag) can also keep food cold for about 18 hours. One more tip: Check to see whether your homeowners insurance covers the replacement cost of spoiled food.

ILLUSTRATION: JOSEPH CARRINGTON



WORSE — BETTER | CR RECOMMENDED | CR SMART BUY

For the latest ratings of these and other product categories, readers with a Digital or All Access membership can go to **CR.org**.

## Solar-Powered String Lights

**WE TESTED:** 7 models
**WE TEST FOR:** How easy the lights are to mount and control, how long the lights stay on after being charged during daylight hours, and more.

**ABOUT THE SCORES:**
Median: 72
Range: 59-78

TOP PICK & LOWEST PRICE
**Brightech Pro Solar Powered Outdoor String Lights**
$26

78 OVERALL SCORE

RUNNER-UP
**Westinghouse Solar Warm White Outdoor String Light**
$45

76 OVERALL SCORE

CAN ALSO BE CHARGED BY USB
**Harbor Breeze Solar Black Indoor/Outdoor String Lights**
$40

72 OVERALL SCORE

## Toaster Ovens for $150 or Less

**WE TESTED:** 34 models
**WE TEST FOR:** How evenly a model bakes muffins and cookies, how well it reheats lasagna, how quickly it toasts a batch of bread, how easy it is to use, and more.

**ABOUT THE SCORES:**
Median: 54
Range: 41-70

SPEEDY TOASTING
**Hamilton Beach 31156**
$105

70 OVERALL SCORE

OFFERS A CONVECTION MODE
**Emeril Power AirFryer 360 S-AFO-001**
$150

63 OVERALL SCORE

NICE PRICE
**Hamilton Beach 31143**
$65

61 OVERALL SCORE

## Single-Flush Toilets

**WE TESTED:** 48 models
**WE TEST FOR:** The ability to move simulated solid waste through the bowl and trap, the cleaning ability of a flush, the number of gallons used per flush, and more.

**ABOUT THE SCORES:**
Median: 71
Range: 35-80

TOP-RATED
**Gerber Viper GWS31502S**
$218

80 OVERALL SCORE

VERY QUIET FLUSH
**American Standard Champion (Home Depot)**
$230

77 OVERALL SCORE

ELONGATED BOWL
**Glacier Bay Power Flush N2450E**
$160

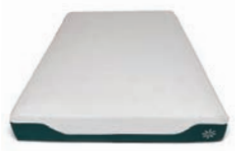
77 OVERALL SCORE

## Mattresses for $400 or Less

**WE TESTED:** 14 models
**WE TEST FOR:** A model's support for large/tall, average, and petite side sleepers and back sleepers; durability; firmness; and more.

**ABOUT THE SCORES:**
Median: 70
Range: 60-78

SUPPORTIVE FOR LARGE/TALL SLEEPERS
**Zinus Cooling Gel Memory Foam Coil**
$390

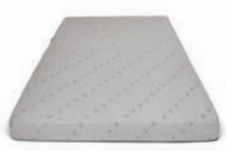


78 OVERALL SCORE

DURABLE & SOFT
**Signature Design By Ashley Chime 12" Plush Hybrid**
$370

75 OVERALL SCORE

GOOD SUPPORT FOR ALL SIZES
**Sleepy's Basic Memory Foam**
$400



74 OVERALL SCORE

**Note:** *We rate different products according to different testing protocols; as a result, Overall Scores of one product category are not comparable with another.*

COMING NEXT MONTH Stand Mixers & More

# What's the best way to clean bird droppings off my car?

WHEN YOU SEE those dreaded white smears on your car, time is of the essence. "Wipe bird excrement off of your vehicle as soon as you can because it can damage the paint the longer it stays there," says John Ibbotson, chief mechanic at CR's Auto Test Center. That's because bird droppings—which are actually poop and pee in one messy package—are highly acidic. They can eat into the outer layer of your car's paint job and eventually lead to peeling, bubbling, dull spots, or all three, he says.

If the smears are still wet, you should be able to wipe them off with a microfiber cloth moistened with water, Ibbotson says. (We advise keeping a few of these cloths tucked away in your car for quick cleanups on the go.)

If the droppings have already dried by the time you spot them, the job gets tougher. But never reach for harsh cleansers like household bleach or even dish soap, Ibbotson says, because those products can damage your car's finish. Instead, he suggests pouring water over the spots to soften them, then using a microfiber cloth dampened with detailing spray (such as Meguiar's Quik Detailer Mist & Wipe) to scrub away the stickiest bits.

For your last step, wipe away any remaining smears with another water-dampened cloth. To make cleanups even easier, keep a good coat of wax on your car. It will add a protective barrier that keeps droppings from sticking as much.

LEARN

We have more than 140 in-house experts who research, test, and compare. Submit your questions at CR.org/askourexperts ... and watch for the answers.

### Why should I eat food that fights inflammation?

EATING A DIET rich in foods that fight inflammation is crucial as you get older. That's because the body's ability to stem this problem often declines as you age, which can lead to chronic inflammation. This means your immune system continually releases compounds that damage healthy tissue over time, increasing your risk of heart disease, cancer, type 2 diabetes, and dementia.

Foods that may worsen inflammation include red and processed meats; fried foods, such as doughnuts and fried chicken; foods with refined carbohydrates, such as white breads; and anything high in added sugars, including some sodas. In a 2020 study published in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology, researchers found that people whose diet contained these kinds of inflammatory foods had a 46 percent increased risk of heart disease.

The good news is that some foods may help reduce inflammation. They include green leafy vegetables such as spinach; yellow, orange, and red vegetables like bell peppers; fatty fish such as salmon; fruits including berries, pears, and apples; whole grains like barley or brown rice; olive oil; and coffee and tea. Many of these are a part of the well-known Mediterranean diet. For easy recipes using anti-inflammatory ingredients, go to **CR.org/anti-inflammatorymeals**.

### I've been searching for free streaming of football games online. Is there a problem with these sites?

YES, STEER CLEAR of them because you're taking a considerable risk. It's tempting to turn to these free sites if you don't have cable or you pay for legitimate streaming services like ESPN+ or NFL Sunday Ticket but then can't watch a game due to blackouts or other plan restrictions. But unauthorized websites offering to show you games free can make you vulnerable to malware, scams, and more.

Some of these sites have lots of ads for fake products and services, hoping to get your credit card info and other personal data. Others may give your computer malware as you watch a game, which can lock you out of your computer until you've paid a ransom or they've sifted through your documents to find bank account passwords and more. Or a hacker may steal your computer's processing power to secretly mine cryptocurrency.

A potential solution: For local games, get an over-the-air TV antenna (about $30). Depending on where you live, it can deliver crystal clear images of at least some games on networks like ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOSEPH CARRINGTON

# CR Insights

PRODUCT RECOMMENDATIONS AND PRACTICAL ADVICE

*Most fire extinguishers should be replaced at least every 12 years.*

IN THE KNOW

## Put Out a Fire—Fast

Experts say you should have a fire extinguisher on each floor of your home, including in the kitchen, laundry room, and garage. In general, the best extinguisher to get is an "ABC" model, which puts out fires involving cloth, paper, or wood (type A); flammable liquids like oil or grease (type B); and electrical equipment (type C). ABC extinguishers can weigh up to 60 pounds. Buy one that you can easily hold in one hand: If it's too heavy, you won't be able to aim and deploy it. Below, three ABC models that get the job done. We also tested fire blankets, which aren't as effective but may help in some scenarios, like preventing a frying pan fire from spreading.

**Amerex B500 Multi-Purpose Fire Extinguisher** $70

The largest model we tested, the Amerex is easy to use despite weighing 8.5 pounds, and it can handle bigger fires than the Kidde or the First Alert models.

**Kidde FA110 Multi-Purpose Fire Extinguisher** $23

This Kidde was effective at putting out fires, was the easiest to operate, and weighs 3.5 pounds. It's also good for places where a larger model won't fit.

**First Alert Rechargeable Home Fire Extinguisher** $24

This extinguisher weighs only 4.5 pounds, but the pin and gauge sit close together, making it a bit tricky to pull the pin.

**JJ Care Fire Blanket** $55 for a 5-pack

Blankets can smother small fires, but in our tests they didn't always eliminate all the flames. So have this in addition to (not in place of) a regular extinguisher.

PHOTO, PROP STYLING BY MIAKO KATOH (HAND). OTHER PHOTOS: SCOTT MEADOWS/CONSUMER REPORTS

**PHOTOGRAPH BY BEN GOLDSTEIN**

HEALTH UPDATE

# NEVER FORGET YOUR MEDS

Need to take multiple medications at different times of day? Missing a dose or double dosing is easy to do, and it can have serious consequences. The American Heart Association estimates that poor medication adherence results in 125,000 deaths each year. So it's crucial to have a system that keeps you on track, says Sue Ojageer, PharmD. Together, these clever tools make it easier to take your meds on time—even when you're on the go.

FOR TWICE-A-DAY PILLS

**Safety 1st Medicine Reminder**
$5 for a pack of 2

Designed to hook onto medicine bottles, this soft-press dot system indicates when a.m. and p.m. doses were taken. "It's straightforward and effective," Ojageer says.

DIGITAL REMINDERS FOR EVERY DOSE

**MyTherapy**
free on app stores

Setting alarms for all of your meds means you're less likely to miss a pill on busy days. This app lets you set custom reminders so that your phone will buzz at the right times.

WHEN YOU'RE ON THE GO

**e-Pill Smart Stainless Water Bottle and Medicine Reminder**
$50

This tumbler's base has three built-in compartments for meds and lets you set three alarms on its LED screen. "Its portability and discreet design make it so convenient," Ojageer says.

FOR DAILY PILLS

**Take-n-Slide Pill Tracker**
$20 for a pack of 5

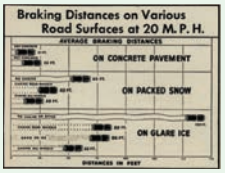
This reusable tracker, which sticks to the side of a pill bottle, clearly marks whether you took a daily pill or not. When you take your pill, just use the daily slider to turn the indicator window red.

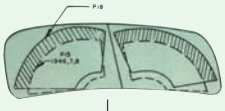
TOP PHOTO: BEN GOLDSTEIN; PROP STYLING BY MIAKO KATOH. OTHER PHOTOS: CONSUMER REPORTS

## CR Time Traveler CAR SAFETY

**1939** We recommend testing the steering on a used car. If you can turn the wheel more than 2.5 inches before the front wheels move, the car is unsafe.

**1942** We show readers how long it takes to brake in different road conditions—such as snowy and rain-slicked roadways.



**1949** New cars are able to wipe a larger area of the windshield, making cars safer to drive in bad weather, our experts say.

**1957** We urge CR readers to ask car salespeople about adding "safety belts" (which don't come standard) when buying a new car.

**1966** CR reports that new Chevrolet and Ford cars offer a flasher system for front and rear turn signals to make stalled motorists visible on the road.



WORSE — BETTER | CR RECOMMENDED | CR GREEN CHOICE

PRODUCT SPOTLIGHT

# The Best Garbage Bags

Is there anything worse than when a fully loaded trash bag rips, spilling garbage everywhere? That's why, in our tests, we poked and prodded kitchen bags from popular brands to see how much abuse they could withstand before breaking. What we found: You can't always trust those "heavy duty" claims on the trash bag box. Even more surprising? Some favorite brands, such as Glad and Hefty, at right, didn't do well in our tests. The good news: We also discovered great choices, shown below, that will keep your trash safely secured in the bag all the way to the curb.

EDITOR'S PICK

**Simplehuman Tall Trash Bags**
18¢ per bag

The strongest bags of any we tested, these resisted tearing from both blunt and sharp objects better than any other bag. They also held up the longest before breaking when weighed down with water.

STRONG BAGS FOR LESS

**Great Value Trash Bags**
15¢ per bag

Walmart's Great Value trash bags are just that—you'll get a solid-but-flexible bag for a good price. They did particularly well in our blunt object test, which checked how long they held up before the object broke through.

BARGAIN BUY

**Reli SuperValue Trash Bags** 5¢ per bag

"These clear plastic bags are an excellent buy," says CR tester José Amézquita. They are the least expensive by far but did well in most of our tests. The bags don't have drawstrings, though: You need to tie them closed with a knot.

WEAKER BAGS

**Amazon Basics Flextra Tall Kitchen Drawstring Trash Bags**
13¢ per bag

These had the weakest sides and bottoms of all the bags we tried, and they also ripped at the top in our weight test.

**Glad ForceFlex Garbage Bags**
20¢ per bag

Glad's pricey bags had flimsy drawstrings and ripped at the top.

**Kirkland Signature Drawstring Kitchen Trash Bags**
16¢ per bag

While their drawstrings were strong, these bags were easily pierced by sharp objects.

**Hefty Strong Tall Kitchen Bags**
16¢ per bag

These bags handled blunt objects well but were still weaker than other bags that we tested.

**1976** Occupants of small cars suffer more than three times as many serious and fatal injuries as those in full-sized cars, we report.

CONSUMER REPORTS
CU JUDGES THE '76 CARS
HOW SAFE ARE SMALL CARS?
TESTING THE NEW CHEVETTE
HOW TO FIND A GOOD MECHANIC
GOOD BETS IN USED CARS
FREQUENCY-OF-REPAIR CHARTS

**1982** Federal regulations now require that child car seats pass a crash test at 30 mph. The Century 200 (above) is safe and easy to use.

**1993** CR analyzes data and finds that the addition of airbags in cars makes frontal crashes more survivable for occupants.

**2017** New safety legislation (supported by CR) prevents car-rental companies from leasing recalled vehicles that haven't been repaired.

**2024** We reveal the safest CR Recommended cars on the market today, including this model, which is a top-rated midsized car.

**Honda Accord Hybrid**
$32,895-$38,890

89
OVERALL SCORE

*To learn more about the vehicles that protect you best in a crash, turn to page 46.*

FOOD IQ™

# WHAT DOES 100 CALORIES OF HALLOWEEN CANDY LOOK LIKE?

Eating a little Halloween candy is a nice way to enjoy fall, but the calories in those "mini" bites can really add up if you're not careful. Use our visual guide, which shows you what 100 calories of some of the most popular candies looks like. For information on even more candies, go to CR.org/halloweencandy.

**1.25**
**Reese's Peanut Butter Cups (Snack Size)**

**22.8**
**M&M's**

**1.2**
**Butterfinger (Fun Size)**

**13**
**Haribo Goldbears**

**3.9**
**3 Musketeers Minis**

**4.5**
**Swedish Fish**

**1.25**
**Twix (Fun Size)**

**5**
**Starburst**

**2.7**
**Milky Way Minis**

**13.7**
**Brach's Candy Corn**

PHOTOS: SCOTT MEADOWS/CONSUMER REPORTS

CR MONEY SAVER

# Reduce Your Water Bill

These tips will help you save money—and the environment.

**Hopopro High Pressure Fixed Showerhead** (5 settings) $30

85 OVERALL SCORE

## Get a Better Showerhead

Standard showerheads use 2.5 gallons of water per minute, but we tried more efficient ones, like the top-rated Hopopro above, which can save a gallon per minute or more while still providing good pressure.

## Replace an Old Toilet

Older toilets use as much as 6 gallons per flush, while new WaterSense toilets do the job with 1.28 gallons or less. By swapping in a new one, the average family can reduce water use by 20 percent or more. Turn to page 9 for a selection of tested models.

## Water Your Garden Early in the Day

Evaporation rates are lower in the morning, so more water is absorbed by greenery. Also consider buying a hose nozzle with an automatic shutoff.

## Reuse Rainwater

When it rains, collect the water in barrels and use it to wash your car or water your lawn. In our review of rain barrels, we liked the model below, which held 49 gallons of water, drained quickly, and has a 40-inch hose that can attach to your regular garden hose.

**FCMP Outdoor Raincatcher 4000** $113

## Don't Rinse Dishes

Your faucet uses as much as 2.2 gallons of water per minute when you rinse dishes. But Energy Star dishwashers use 4 to 6 gallons for an entire cycle—and clean better when you don't prerinse.

## Wash Only Full Loads of Dishes

If you wait to run full loads, and follow the owner's manual instructions for where to place dishes, you'll save water and make the most use of the cleaning sprays in your machine.

## Wash Most Clothes on the Auto Setting

Unless you're washing a mud-caked sports jersey, skip "heavy duty" or stain settings, which use more water than you need for a normal load. Using cold water also saves money.

## Use Less Laundry Detergent

Using too much detergent can cause high-efficiency washers to use more water in an extended rinse cycle. Plus, by pouring less into each load, you'll save money on detergent.

ILLUSTRATION: JASON SCHNEIDER. PHOTOS: CONSUMER REPORTS

WORSE — BETTER | CR RECOMMENDED

STOVETOP SMARTS

# The Right Pan for Every Meal

Nonstick frying pans are beloved, and it's easy to see why: The great ones heat up evenly and keep foods from sticking, which makes cleanup easy. But nonstick isn't right for every dish. (You wouldn't want to use a nonstick pan for searing or browning meats, for instance.) What follows: Our guide to the best pans to use for different dishes, and our favorite pan in each category.

## 1 Nonstick

**BEST FOR** scrambling eggs and cooking pancakes, which can stick on other surfaces. You'll use less butter or oil while cooking on nonstick, and still have food slide off the pan.
**CR TIP** Nonstick coatings can be easily damaged. Don't use cooking spray on nonstick (it leaves a sticky residue), and never rinse a hot pan under water; it will warp.

**Caraway Ceramic-Coated Non-Stick** $95

89 OVERALL SCORE

## 2 Stainless Steel

**BEST FOR** browning or searing meats. The shiny surface makes it easy to tell when the meat is browning. It's oven-proof, so it can also be used for dishes that start on the stove and then get finished in the oven, like pork chops.
**CR TIP** Stainless steel pans can be tricky to get clean. The Oxo pan shown here scrubs up easily by hand and is dishwasher-safe.

**Oxo Stainless Steel Mira Series** $80

89 OVERALL SCORE

## 3 Cast Iron

**BEST FOR** oven-cooked meals like roasts, cornbread, deep-dish pizza, quiches, and more. Cast iron is also good for deep-frying: It keeps oil at a steady temperature.
**CR TIP** Enamel-coated cast-iron pans, like the Tramontina here, are easier to clean than uncoated pans and don't need to be seasoned.

**Tramontina Enameled Cast-Iron Series 1000** $60

79 OVERALL SCORE

## 4 Carbon Steel

**BEST FOR** foods you cook quickly at high heat, like fish. Similar to stainless, it's great for searing steak, too.
**CR TIP** Carbon steel pans are durable but need to be seasoned regularly. As you continue to use and season the pan, its surface will develop a smooth patina that makes it as slick as a nonstick.

**Matfer Bourgeat Black Carbon** $84

68 OVERALL SCORE

## 5 Wok

**BEST FOR** stir-fried dishes. A flat-bottom wok with high sides, like the Babish pan shown here, will let you toss meat and veggies around on high heat without spilling any.
**CR TIP** Though woks can be nonstick or made of cast iron, we like carbon steel best because it's lightweight and conducts heat better than nonstick versions.

**Babish 14" Carbon Steel Wok** $50

93 OVERALL SCORE

PHOTOS: SCOTT MEADOWS/CONSUMER REPORTS (4); MATFER BOURGEAT (1)



WORSE — BETTER | CR RECOMMENDED | CR SMART BUY

## RECALLS

TO STAY INFORMED ABOUT RECALLS FOR YOUR VEHICLES, READERS WITH MEMBERSHIP CAN USE OUR FREE CAR RECALL TRACKER AT **CR.ORG/MORE**.

### CHRYSLER, ALFA ROMEO, FIAT, AND JEEP VEHICLES

Chrysler is recalling 332,000 Alfa Romeo, Fiat, and Jeep models because the front-seat airbag may not deploy as intended in a crash due to a faulty connection, which could increase the risk of injury to the driver. The recall includes 2017-2024 Alfa Romeo Giulia, 2018-2025 Alfa Romeo Stelvio, 2024 Fiat 500e, 2019-2023 Fiat 500X, and 2019-2023 Jeep Renegade.
**What to do** Dealers will repair the faulty connection, free of charge. The automaker is contacting owners of potentially affected vehicles by mail. Owners can call the automaker at 800-853-1403. The NHTSA campaign number for this recall is 24V-510, and Chrysler's own number is 82B.

### BISSELL STEAM CLEANERS

Bissell is recalling about 3.2 million steam cleaners because they can expel hot water or steam while heating or during use, posing a burn hazard. The cleaners were sold at Target, Walmart, and other department and home goods stores nationwide, as well as online at Amazon, bissell.com, hsn.com, and other websites from August 2008 through May 2024 for $35 to $40, or $70 for a two-pack.
**What to do** Stop using the steam cleaner. Call 855-417-7001 or go to bissell.com/steamshotrecall for instructions and either a $60 credit to be used toward a bissell.com purchase or a $40 refund.

### HATCH BABY POWER ADAPTERS

Hatch Baby is recalling about 919,400 AC power adapters sold with some Rest 1st Generation sound machines. The plastic around the adapters can come off when removing the adapter from a power outlet, leaving the power prongs exposed and posing a shock hazard. The adapters were sold with certain Rest 1st Generation sound machines at Best Buy, BuyBuy Baby, Nordstrom, Pottery Barn Kids, Target, and Walmart stores nationwide from January 2019 through September 2022 for $60 to $70, and on Amazon and hatch.com from January 2019 through May 2024 for $60 to $200.
**What to do** Stop using the power adapter. Call 888-918-4614 or go to hatch.co/adapter-recall for instructions on how to get a free replacement. Hatch is also contacting all registered owners directly.

### TIDEWAY HAIR DRYERS

Tideway is recalling about 39,600 hair dryers because they lack an immersion protection device, posing a shock or electrocution hazard if they fall into water when plugged in. The hair dryers were sold online at shopify.com, tiktokshop.com, and other websites from November 2023 through March 2024 for about $170.
**What to do** Stop using the hair dryer and unplug it. Call 209-267-4999 or go to tideway.shop/recall for instructions on how to receive a free replacement.

### ATOMI SMART HEATERS

Atomi is recalling about 99,400 tower, tabletop, and wall models because the smart heaters can turn on without user input, posing burn and fire hazards. The heaters were sold at Ace Hardware, Best Buy, BJ's Wholesale Club, Costco, Hammacher Schlemmer, Home Depot, Menards, Sam's Club, and Walmart stores nationwide, and online at Amazon, atomiusa.com, and lowes.com from October 2019 through April 2024 for $80 to $150, depending on the model.
**What to do** Stop using the heater and unplug it. Call 888-770-7140 or go to atomiheaterrecall.com for instructions and to receive a full refund. For a refund, you must cut the power cord and submit a photo of both the cut cord and the manufacturer's label on the heater's underside.

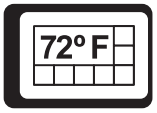
### ESSENTIAL VALUES GOLD GRIP SOLVENT & KITS

Torquay eTrading (doing business as Essential Values) is recalling about 26,000 cleaning products because they are deceptively labeled as "Safe and Non-Toxic" and lack required cautionary statements, posing a risk of poisoning to consumers. The products were sold online at Amazon, ebay.com, essentialvalues.com, and walmart.com from December 2017 through May 2024 for about $9, and the Golf Grip Kit was sold with golf grip tape for about $13.
**What to do** Stop using the products. Call Torquay eTrading at 347-587-8964 or go to essentialvalues.us/pages/recall for information on how to obtain a free corrected label to put on the bottle.

ICONS: RODRIGO DAMATI. PHOTO: CPSC (HEATER)

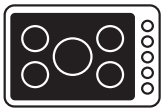
## OCTOBER IS THE BEST TIME TO BUY ...

### THERMOSTATS




### SMOKE & CARBON MONOXIDE DETECTORS

### COOKTOPS



*For more info, go to CR.org/buy.*

# PRODUCT UPDATE

THE LATEST RATINGS FROM OUR LABS

## The Right Flooring for Every Room

Love the look of wood, tile, or stone? The best products from CR's tests offer beautiful, durable options that are easy to install.

**by Tanya A. Christian**

TOP-RATED LAMINATE

**$ Home Decorators Collection Nobelford Oak 56807**

$2 per square foot

**91** OVERALL SCORE

If **YOUR KITCHEN TILES ARE** dated, your bathroom floor looks worn, or you've been dreaming of hardwood in your living room, chances are you've considered doing a flooring project. But you may be worried that the job will be expensive and disruptive. The good news is it doesn't have to be. "Budget friendly" is the hot new trend when it comes to flooring. What's more, shopping is simpler than ever. Here's how to save money and avoid hassles.

## New Materials, Better Prices

According to Angi, the home services platform that connects homeowners with contractors, the national average for replacing a floor is $12.50 per square foot, installed. (That's an average of $3,153 for a 500-square-foot room.)

At least one-third of that expense goes toward the installation–meaning the best way to keep the total cost down is by picking a lower-priced flooring product. Fortunately, you can now get the look of high-end materials in a range of less expensive (and more durable) options. Love natural hardwood (from $6 to $25 per square foot)? Try a realistic wood-look vinyl plank for $2 to $14 per square foot. Want the luxe appeal of marble? Look-alike ceramic or porcelain tile withstands wear better and costs roughly the same. (All prices are from Angi.)

Beyond price and performance, be aware that some products have glues and resins that can emit formaldehyde, which can irritate the eyes, nose, throat, and skin or trigger an asthma attack, even at low levels. Higher levels of exposure have been linked to cancer. The Environmental Protection Agency is evaluating those risks, which could determine future regulations.

## Easier Installation

You could shop for your own flooring materials and then hire a contractor, but one-stop shopping is simpler. To get multiple quotes quickly, try an online home services marketing platform like Fixr or Modernize. Based on your ZIP code, desired flooring type, budget, and schedule, qualified pros will reach out to set up an in-home consultation.

Allow an hour or two for your appointment, and expect the pro to measure, review flooring samples, and offer installation advice, says Chad Schloerke, chief operating officer of Floor Coverings International, a company that offers this service in 45 states.

Once you've picked an installer (get three estimates and ask for references before hiring one), they should be able to remove your old flooring, prepare the subfloor, and finish the installation in as quickly as a day.

# 6 MATERIALS THAT CAN TRANSFORM YOUR SPACE

### PREFINISHED SOLID WOOD

$6 to $25 per sq. ft.*

**PROS** A factory-applied protective coating helps it resist wear and water. Solid wood can be refinished several times.
**CONS** It can get dented, fade in sunlight, and warp from moisture.

### ENGINEERED WOOD

$5 to $16 per sq. ft.

**PROS** Constructed from of a layer of wood bonded to plywood, it's water-resistant and can be as durable as solid wood.
**CONS** Bonding glues and resins can emit formaldehyde, and the flooring may dent.

### LAMINATE

$3 to $13 per sq. ft.

**PROS** Made of fiberboard topped with an image and a protective layer, it resembles other materials and resists scratching and denting better than wood.
**CONS** Some look fake. Glues and resins can emit formaldehyde.

### VINYL

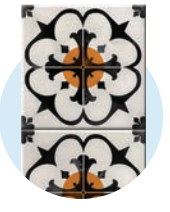
$2 to $14 per sq. ft.

**PROS** Water-resistant vinyl resists wear, dents, and stains.
**CONS** It can fade with sun exposure. Lower-priced sheets won't pass as real wood, and top-of-the-line luxury vinyl can cost as much as wood.

### PORCELAIN

$15 to $20 per sq. ft.

**PROS** Denser than ceramic, it's less susceptible to scratches and chips and can resist temperature swings, so you can use it outside.
**CONS** Tiles can crack if heavy objects are dropped on them.



### CERAMIC

$15 to $20 per sq. ft.

**PROS** There's a nearly endless array of colors, patterns, and styles to choose from, and many resist wear, moisture, scratches, dents, and stains.
**CONS** Ceramic tile can be susceptible to cracking.

*Price ranges are from Angi and include installation.

PHOTO SOURCES: MARGARET PALMER/STOCKSY (KITCHEN); SCOTT MEADOWS/CONSUMER REPORTS (FLOORING)

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC HEINTZ, FLOORING ILLUSTRATIONS BY SINELAB

# YOUR WHOLE-HOUSE GUIDE

The best pick for any space is a healthy marriage of style and safety. To find the right match, consider how you use the room, how much traffic it gets, whether it's damp or dry, and the climate you live in.

## Entrances & Utility Rooms

**WHAT TO KNOW** Hardworking spaces like mudrooms and laundry rooms need flooring that won't be damaged by heavy traffic, dirty shoes and boots, and moisture. It should also be easy to clean. For a foyer that gets lighter use, pick a durable material that complements the flooring in adjoining spaces.
**BEST CHOICES** In an entry, a mudroom, or a laundry room, porcelain tile is ideal. If your dog comes in soaking wet or your washing machine leaks, you won't have to worry that your floors will be ruined. Plus, heavy washers and dryers won't dent it. Luxury vinyl tile (look for one that's 100 percent waterproof) can work as well. Check the dynamic coefficient of friction (DCOF) rating of any product you're considering. This indicates the amount of grip a surface offers while a person is moving. The higher the number, the more slip-resistant the material. Make sure utility room flooring has a DCOF of 0.60 or higher to avoid slips.

## Kitchen

**WHAT TO KNOW** For this busy, high-spill zone, choose flooring that's resistant to dents, stains, and water. Also consider how it will feel underfoot if you spend a lot of time standing while cooking or cleaning up.
**BEST CHOICES** Porcelain and ceramic tile are both highly durable, easy-to-maintain choices, as is laminate. If you want something softer under your feet, consider wood but know that it's likely to get some dents over time. Or try vinyl or cork (a material that CR doesn't test), which has a softer feel and good slip resistance—but may be less resistant to water than some other options.

## Bathrooms

**WHAT TO KNOW** It's very important to think "nonslip" here. Look for a DCOF rating of 0.60 or higher. You'll also want a material that's easy to clean and is water-resistant. For the latter, look for a water absorption rating of less than 7 percent.
**BEST CHOICES** Porcelain or ceramic tiles with a honed or matte finish work well.

## Living Spaces

**WHAT TO KNOW** In living, dining, and family rooms, you want something that looks great and can withstand light traffic and the occasional mess. For a cohesive look—especially important with an open floor plan—limit yourself to one or two flooring types. So, for example, tile in the kitchen and the same wood style in the living and dining rooms, or luxury vinyl plank (LVP) through all the areas.
**BEST CHOICES** If you prefer traditional hardwood, select a prefinished wood that resists foot traffic and sunlight, especially if you have a bright home. Laminate and LVP are both resistant to scuffs, dents, and scratches—good for areas that get more wear.

## Bedrooms

**WHAT TO KNOW** Because bedrooms don't get as much foot traffic as the rest of the home, durability is less of a concern. But you'll still want a floor that resists stains from daily wear and the occasional coffee splash. And a material with a warmer feel underfoot can help the room feel cozier.
**BEST CHOICES** Wood (solid or engineered) or LVP can create a natural look and won't feel as cold and hard as porcelain or ceramic tile. While wood might seem like the classic choice, LVP offers easy installation and low maintenance.

PHOTO: LOWE'S

**Ratings** › **Walk This Way** The top flooring products in our tests hold up well to daily wear and tear, resist damage from sunlight, and have a safe, slip-resistant surface.

| Brand + Product | Overall Score | Price | Test Results | | | | | | | Features + Specs | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Per sq. ft. | Resists foot traffic | Resists scratches | Resists stains | Resists dents | Water resistance | Resistance to slipping | Resists sunlight (UV) | Sq. ft. per box | Surface smoothness |
| **PREFINISHED SOLID WOOD FLOORING** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ✓ **LL Flooring** Bellawood Iron Hill Maple Character 10047324 | 61 | $7.70 | ⌃ | ! | ⌃⌃ | ⌄⌄ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ! | 21 | Smooth |
| **LL Flooring** Bellawood Artisan Kensington Oak 10047958 | 50 | $9.00 | ! | ⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌄⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃ | 20 | Slightly textured |
| **ENGINEERED WOOD FLOORING** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ✓ **LL Flooring** Bellawood Geneva White Oak 10045563 | 71 | $9.00 | ⌃⌃ | ⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌄⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ! | 24 | Slightly textured |
| **LifeProof** Berkley Waterproof Engineered Bamboo Click YY-VSPC-DG02 (Home Depot) | 52 | $4.20 | ⌄ | ! | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | 15 | Slightly textured |
| **LL Flooring** Duravana Hybrid Resilient Foggy Bottom Oak 10052741 | 50 | $4.00 | ⌄ | ! | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 24 | Slightly textured |
| **LAMINATE FLOORING** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| $ **Home Decorators Collection** Nobelford Oak 56807 | 91 | $2.00 | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 16 | Slightly textured |
| ✓ **Pergo** Outlast+ Vintage Pewter Oak LF000848 (Home Depot) | 83 | $3.20 | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 20 | Very textured |
| **LL Flooring** Dreamhome Shadow Sail Oak 10054113 | 54 | $3.30 | ⌄ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ! | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 21 | Slightly textured |
| **TrafficMaster** Handscraped Saratoga Hickory 34089 (Home Depot) | 53 | $1.40 | ⌄ | ! | ⌃⌃ | ⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 24 | Slightly textured |
| **VINYL FLOORING** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ✓ **Stainmaster** Barnes Oak LSM02-920 | 86 | $3.50 | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 17 | Slightly textured |
| ✓ **Shaw** Brookside Bordeaux HD96807084 | 83 | $4.70 | ⌃⌃ | ⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 19 | Slightly textured |
| $ **Style Selections (Lowe's)** Slate Oak 813SLK01C | 80 | $2.30 | ⌃⌃ | ⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 22 | Slightly textured |
| ✓ **LifeProof** Sundance Canyon Hickory HLVSPC030-C | 80 | $4.20 | ⌃⌃ | ⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 19 | Slightly textured |
| ✓ **Malibu Wide Plank** French Oak Lombard HDMLCL272RC | 80 | $4.30 | ⌃⌃ | ! | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 30 | Slightly textured |
| **LifeProof** Nashville Oak I106514L (Home Depot) | 75 | $3.10 | ⌃⌃ | ⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 20 | Very textured |
| **PORCELAIN TILE FLOORING** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ✓ **Florida Tile** Home Collection Wind River Beige CHDEWND016X24 | 95 | $2.10 | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ! | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 14 | Slightly textured |
| ✓ **Allen + Roth** Ash 0600101 | 93 | $3.70 | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ! | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 10 | Slightly textured |
| ✓ **LifeProof** Shadow Wood LP33624HD1PR (Home Depot) | 90 | $2.50 | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 15 | Textured |
| ✓ **Marazzi** Montagna Dapple Gray ULM7 (Home Depot) | 89 | $2.00 | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ! | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 15 | Textured |
| ✓ **LL Flooring** Cabrillo Gray 10048478 | 81 | $2.00 | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 16 | Smooth |
| **Dal-Tile** Baker Wood BK10624HD1PR | 79 | $1.65 | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌄⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 15 | Smooth |
| **True Porcelain** Pensacola Brown 1101671 | 71 | $2.00 | ⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌄ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | ⌃⌃ | 20 | Smooth |

› Digital and All Access members can find the latest, complete ratings at **CR.org/flooring**.

**HOW WE TEST: Overall Score** is based on performance in all our tests. **Resists foot traffic** denotes how quickly surface wear was noticeable after repeated passes with an abrasion tester. **Resists scratches** measures how long it took a weighted testing instrument to create a scratch. **Resists stains** shows how well the floor stood up to products like mustard and shoe polish. **Resists dents** indicates the resistance to damage from dropped heavy objects. **Water resistance** observes the effects of short-term exposure to moisture. **Resistance to slipping** (or DCOF) is measured using a tribometer and notes how well the surface resists slipping. **Resists sunlight** measures damage after two weeks of exposure to ultraviolet light.

⌄⌄ ⌄ ! ⌃ ⌃⌃ WORSE — BETTER | ✓ CR RECOMMENDED | $ CR SMART BUY

# SUGAR SUBSTITUTES ARE EVERYWHERE*

**Aspartame, monk fruit, stevia, and more can be found in our favorite staples. But are they actually safe to eat?**

***Even in These Surprising Foods**

BY SALLY WADYKA • PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN GOLDSTEIN

**YOU'RE PROBABLY USED** to seeing diet sodas made with artificial sweeteners like aspartame and sucralose. But now there are fresh-sounding sodas with zero grams of sugar or no artificial sweeteners that contain allulose, monk fruit, or stevia—and you have to wonder, are these newer sugar substitutes better for you?

They also seem to be in many more types of food: sucralose in English muffins, allulose in breakfast cereal, stevia in ketchup, monk fruit in marinated meats.

"People are undoubtedly consuming more sweeteners than they realize as those ingredients make their way into foods like microwave popcorn and chicken nuggets," says Allison Sylvetsky, PhD, an associate professor of exercise and nutrition sciences at the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health in Washington, D.C.

And that has Sylvetsky and other experts concerned. Limiting the consumption of added sugars and all of their nutritionally empty calories clearly has health benefits, but research suggests that some sugar substitutes may pose certain health risks. How concerned should you be?

## Sugar-Substitute Overload

There's a reason these sweeteners are showing up in more foods. "People are looking for products lower in sugar," says Marion Nestle, PhD, professor emerita of nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University. According to a 2024 survey by the International Food Information Council, 76 percent of Americans say they're trying to limit the amount of sugar they consume for a variety of reasons, including to improve their diet, lose weight, and prevent health problems like heart disease and diabetes.

Food manufacturers are responding to the growing demand by using nonsugar sweeteners to replace some or all of the sugar in their products. Several of these ingredients are calorie-free, while others have nearly as many calories as sugar. But because they can be 100 (monk fruit) to 20,000 (advantame) times sweeter than sugar, manufacturers can use much less of them in their products, helping to keep the calorie count low.

"Low- and no-calorie sweeteners deliver a great-tasting product," says Kristen Kurtz, a spokesperson for the Calorie Control Council, an industry group that represents manufacturers of sugar substitutes. And, she says, these sweeteners "provide the texture, taste, convenience, and quality that manufacturers need and consumers want."

Another factor that may contribute to the growing use of sugar substitutes is a new food labeling rule proposed by the Food and Drug Administration. Among other things, it would limit the amount of added sugars that manufacturers could put into a product and still label it healthy to 2.5 grams or less per serving.

Most Americans should cut back on added sugars—on average they supply nearly 13 percent of an adult's daily calories. But experts are not sure that replacing sugar with these substitutes is actually healthier. And some suspect that there are sweeteners that may be harmful.

## Sweeteners and Dieting

Controlling your weight may seem like the most obvious reason to choose products with nonsugar sweeteners. And according to the Calorie Control Council, some research shows that "sugar substitutes not only reduce sugar intake but can decrease weight as a result."

But experts say that while the sweeteners might help you cut back on calories and lose weight in the short-term, there's little data to show that

## 19 NAMES FOR SUGAR ALTERNATIVES

It's not easy to sleuth out sugar substitutes in products you buy, because those additives go by so many different names. Here, a list to consult when reading labels and searching for sweeteners.

- Acesulfame potassium
- Advantame
- Allulose
- Aspartame
- Brazzein
- Erythritol
- Lactitol
- Maltitol
- Mannitol
- Monk fruit (Luo Han Guo)
- Neotame
- Rebaudioside A (Reb A)
- Saccharin
- Sorbitol
- Stevia
- Sucralose
- Thaumatin
- Trehalose
- Xylitol

*Scan this QR code for a PDF of the list.*

PROP STYLING BY MIAKO KATOH

# Find the Hidden Sweetener

It's hard to figure out if a product contains a sugar substitute unless you read the fine print. But labels can offer some clues.

**LIGHT OR LITE**

This indicates that a food is lower in calories or fat than the regular version. But that could be because all or some of the sugar was replaced with a no-calorie substitute, like the sucralose in this bread.

they'll help you keep the weight off. "We don't have good evidence that sweeteners provide the weight-loss benefits people think they do," says Jotham Suez, PhD, an assistant professor at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, who studies sugar substitutes. In fact, in 2023 the World Health Organization cited that lack of evidence in its warning to not use sugar substitutes to control weight.

## Healthy or Not?

The Calorie Control Council says that nonsugar sweeteners are safe, pointing out that governments around the world, including the U.S., allow their use. The FDA has approved all the sweeteners added to food in the U.S., based on studies in animals and people. It also set acceptable daily limits for many of them.

Still, questions remain about their effects on our health. While our bodies know how to process sugar, Nestle says that we didn't evolve to metabolize nonsugar sweeteners and that "we don't know nearly enough about how they behave in the body." She adds that there are just enough suggestions of potential harm to make health professionals uneasy.

Some of the most worrisome data suggests a connection between sweeteners and an increased risk of certain cancers, heart disease, diabetes, depression, and poorer gut health.

➜ **Cancer:** A 2022 French study that followed more than 100,000 adults for nearly eight years found a link between a higher intake of artificial sweeteners—especially acesulfame potassium and aspartame—and cancer. People who consumed an average of about 80 mg per day of them—the amount in one-third to one-half of a 12-ounce can of diet soda—had a 13 percent higher risk of cancer than those who didn't consume any amount.

➜ **Heart disease:** The same French researchers found that people who consumed the most artificial sweeteners had a 9 percent increased risk of heart disease and an 18 percent increased risk of a stroke. Acesulfame potassium, aspartame, and sucralose had the greatest effect.

More recent studies suggest that sugar alcohols such as erythritol and xylitol may also harm the heart. "Immediately after eating them—and for several hours after—people are more susceptible to blood clots," which are a leading cause of heart attacks and strokes, says the

## Find the Hidden Sweetener

*Continued*

### LOWER SUGAR

Claims like this one could indicate that a product still contains sugar. But it also may have sugar substitutes, like the monk fruit in this Quaker instant oatmeal.

### NO SUGAR ADDED

This can mean that a product uses a sweetener from plants, like the stevia in this Heinz ketchup. Variations of this claim include "zero sugar added" and "sugar free."

study's author Stanley Hazen, MD, a cardiologist at the Cleveland Clinic.

➜ **Diabetes** People who regularly eat foods with sugar substitutes may be more likely to develop type 2 diabetes, and a 2022 study published in the journal Cell hints at a possible reason. The researchers measured the glucose levels in 120 volunteers over two weeks after they consumed 102 mg of sucralose or 180 mg of saccharin. "We saw a gradual disruption of the body's ability to handle glucose," says Suez of Johns Hopkins, who led the study. Over time, this may increase the risk of diabetes.

➜ **Depression** A 2023 study in the journal JAMA Network Open involving more than 30,000 women found that those with the highest intake of artificial sweeteners had the greatest risk of depression.

"We know from animal studies that artificial sweeteners may trigger the transmission of signaling molecules in the brain that are important for mood," says Andrew T. Chan, MD, a professor of medicine at the Harvard Medical School and one of that study's authors.

➜ **Gut health** An imbalance in the collection of healthy bacteria in the digestive system is thought to contribute to a variety of diseases. The 2022 study in Cell that looked at sweeteners and diabetes risk also investigated the effect of aspartame, saccharine, stevia, and sucralose on the composition of bacteria in the gut. "All four sweeteners caused notable alterations to gut bacteria," Suez says. "They led to changes in the microbiome that were significant enough to disrupt metabolic health."

## Are 'Natural' Sugar Substitutes Safer ?

Much of the research on sugar substitutes involves older artificial sweeteners like aspartame and saccharin. But that doesn't necessarily mean that newer ones made from natural sources are better. It just means there hasn't been a lot of long-term research on them.

For example, sweeteners from plants (such as allulose, monk fruit, and stevia) and sugar alcohols (like erythritol and xylitol) may be called "natural," but experts warn not to fall for the health halo that seems to confer. According to Sylvetsky at George Washington University, there's very little research on those types of sweeteners. "It's hard to say these sugar substitutes are better than artificial ones," she says.

**NO ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS**

A product with this claim might not have artificial sugars such as aspartame or sucralose. But there's a good chance it has "natural" low-cal sweeteners like the monk fruit and stevia in this drink.

**KETO-FRIENDLY OR LOW-CARB**

Packaged foods marketed this way are often sweetened with sugar alcohols like xylitol or, as here, stevia or other nonsugar sweeteners.

Based on the current understanding of how the body reacts to these natural sweeteners, the World Health Organization says that there's a reasonable expectation that they have effects similar to those of artificial sweeteners such as aspartame and sucralose.

## Going Lower on Sugar Subs

Unless you totally steer clear of packaged and processed foods, there's a good chance you're getting at least some nonsugar sweeteners in your diet. And given how widely these ingredients are now being used in hundreds—if not thousands—of products, the amount you consume could really add up.

And that's what worries the experts. "We don't know scientifically what the threshold is for when you might start to see negative effects" from consuming the sweeteners, Sylvetsky says.

Moderation is key. "I don't think anyone worries too much about the occasional artificially sweetened beverage," Nestle says. "It's regular consumption of these sweeteners in large amounts that seems unwise."

To help keep your intake of sweeteners in check, follow these suggestions:

***Cut down on packaged and processed foods whenever you can.*** When you eat mostly whole foods (like fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes, and nuts) and limit your consumption of packaged and processed ones, you don't have to worry about consuming an overload of added sugar or sugar substitutes.

***Read labels carefully.*** Don't just check the nutrition facts label on products; also read the ingredients list on the back of the packaging. Scan it for all the sugar substitutes it may contain. See our complete list of these ingredients on page 24 and refer to it when you head to the grocery store.

***Get your sugar fix naturally.*** Fruit or fruit-sweetened dishes can give you that taste you crave without added sugar or sugar substitutes.

***Be aware of how often you eat foods with sugar substitutes.*** The occasional diet soda or light yogurt is fine, but if you regularly consume several foods that contain these sweeteners, consider cutting back on them. The experts we talked with say that in general, less is better.

HOW TO

# SKIP THOSE LINES

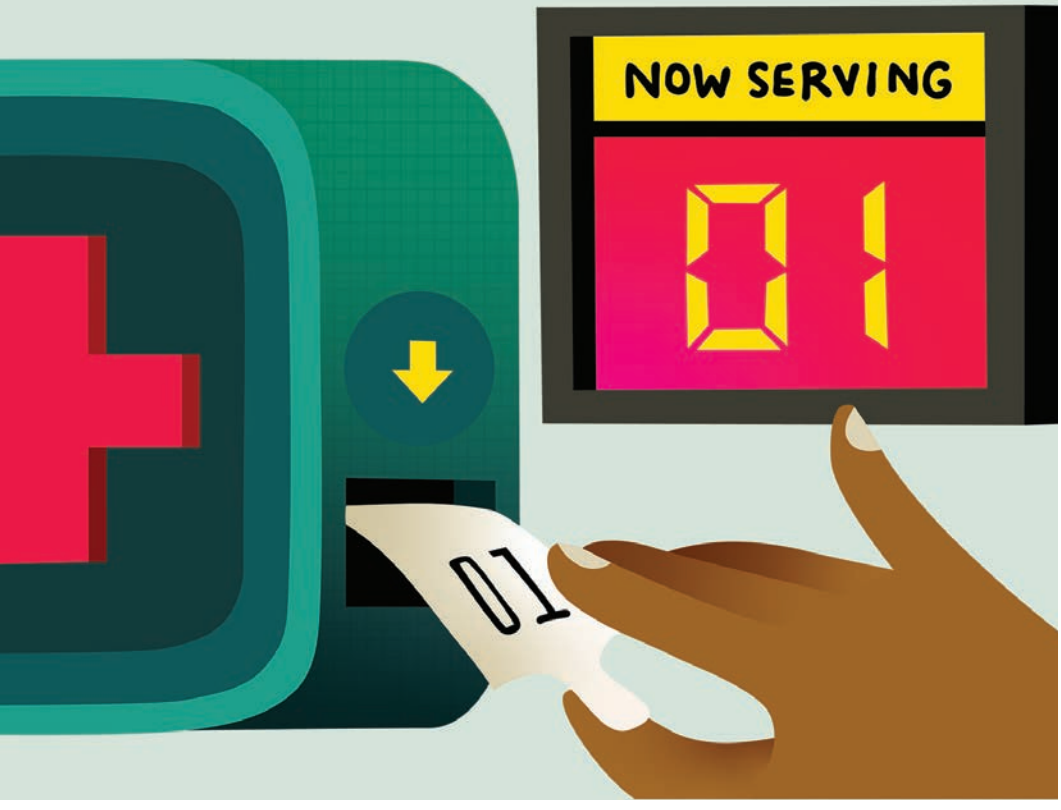
Get medical appointments and restaurant reservations without waiting, speed through airport security, and more. Secrets ahead.

BY AMANDA WALKER • ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALEX EBEN MEYER

WE'VE ALL experienced the stress of missing a flight because of long security lines, waiting on hold for an hour trying to get through to the IRS, or being told we have to wait a month to see a doctor for back pain.

All that waiting may be one of the most unpleasant things we have to do. According to the 2022 State of Waiting in Line survey by the technology company Waitwhile, it's like a form of torture. Nearly 69 percent of 1,000 consumers surveyed said it made them feel bored, annoyed, frustrated, and impatient. Richard Larson, a retired MIT professor who has studied queues, says that Americans spend two to three years over their lifetime in them, and that lines make us feel like life is literally slipping away while we just stand there. And then there are the lost opportunities. What would we do with our time if we had two or three years of it back?

But with some clever moves, you can avoid long lines and put the time you reclaim to better use.




# Reduce Doctor Office Waits

The average wait for an appointment with a doctor for new patients is 26 days. That's according to a 2022 survey of 1,034 medical offices in 15 metropolitan areas by the physician recruiting firm Merritt Hawkins (now AMN Healthcare Physician Solutions). It's the longest average wait time since the company began the surveys in 2004. Here's how to make it shorter.

**Get on a waiting list**
Doctors' offices often get last-minute cancellations. So book the earliest appointment you're offered, but then ask to be put on a waiting list. You can also call the office to ask when cancellations tend to happen. For example, a receptionist who books appointments for Advanced Dermatology, which has offices in Connecticut and New York, told us that cancellations are more likely on Mondays and Fridays, and that the best time to call on those days is between 8 and 10 a.m.

**Work the provider's portal**
Use your practice's online patient portal to send a message to your doctor directly. Explain what your problem is and ask if it's possible to get an appointment sooner than the one given to you by the front desk.

**See a specialist more quickly**
Ask your referring doctor to call the specialist's office to explain why you should be seen in a more timely way. Or get a referral to another specialist who can see you sooner.

**Use an independent pharmacy**
In the past, CR found that 41 percent of people surveyed said mom and pop pharmacists went out of their way to fill prescriptions quickly. Only 20 percent said that was true at chain pharmacies. Independent pharmacies were also more likely to suggest a less expensive drug.

## GET THROUGH TO THE IRS

**CALL THIS NUMBER**
If you want to speak to an IRS rep, cut waiting time by calling 800-829-1040; for business filers, it's 800-829-4933. For info on a current-year refund, try the automated refund line at 800-829-1954 or 866-464-2050 for an amended return. The IRS website says wait times average about 3 minutes from January through April and 11 minutes from May through December.

# Speed Through an Airport

The most dreaded lines at an airport are for security screening and rental cars. But there are ways to beat them.

**Enroll in an airport security program**
Paying for security clearance programs can significantly cut your time in lines. TSA PreCheck, for example, gives you access to faster security lanes at more than 200 airports for $78 for a five-year membership. As of July 2024, 99 percent of TSA PreCheck passengers waited less than 10 minutes in line, according to the Transportation Security Administration.

If you'll be traveling overseas more than once in the next five years, Nick Ewen, senior editorial director at the travel website The Points Guy, recommends joining the Global Entry Program instead. It includes TSA PreCheck and provides expedited entry back into the U.S. A five-year membership costs $100.

You can apply online at ttp.dhs.gov, then schedule an in-person appointment at one of the Global Entry enrollment centers near you. One drawback: Due to a backlog, it may take a few months to get an appointment.

**Download an airline's app**
That usually lets you get your boarding pass 24 hours in advance. And many airline apps allow you to easily change your seat and track your checked luggage, and they'll alert you to flight changes.

**Join rental car loyalty programs**
It's free to join a rental car company's loyalty program. Membership will typically allow you to skip the line at the counter and go directly to the rental car garage at larger airports. There, you'll find a kiosk or person to tell you where to find your car. "The keys are in the car, you show your license and credit card on the way out, and you're on your way," Ewen says.

# Avoid Lines at Stores

People spend more time waiting in line at retail stores than at banks, doctors' offices, pharmacies, and restaurants combined, according to a 2022 survey by Waitwhile, the technology company. But the strategies below can speed you through the checkouts (or avoid them altogether).

**Schedule a pickup**
Getting your goods at the curb is now more ubiquitous than you might expect. A 2024 survey from Digital Commerce 360, a research company, found that 48 percent of the top 500 retail chains in the U.S. offer this free convenience, up from just 10 percent in 2020. So after ordering online, you can avoid stepping foot in the stores of retailers as far ranging as Best Buy, The Container Store, Dick's

**DOWNLOAD THE APP**
The IRS app, IRS2Go, provides general information about tax filing, the status of a refund, tax payment options, and other IRS news. You can also request transcripts of tax returns, helpful when addressing IRS inquiries.

**SCHEDULE AN APPOINTMENT**
Need advice on a complicated tax issue? Schedule an in-person appointment at an IRS Taxpayer Assistance Center. TACs provide services including assistance with account inquiries, tax return prep, and document review. Use the Taxpayer Assistance Locator tool or the IRS2Go app to find one near you.

**HIRE HELP**
The average cost to hire an accountant to deal with tax issues was $38 an hour in 2023, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. But a CPA can often expedite the resolution process by communicating directly with the IRS so you don't have to.

Sporting Goods, Gap, Home Depot, Kohl's, Nordstrom, Office Depot/ OfficeMax, Old Navy, Petco, Target, and Walmart.

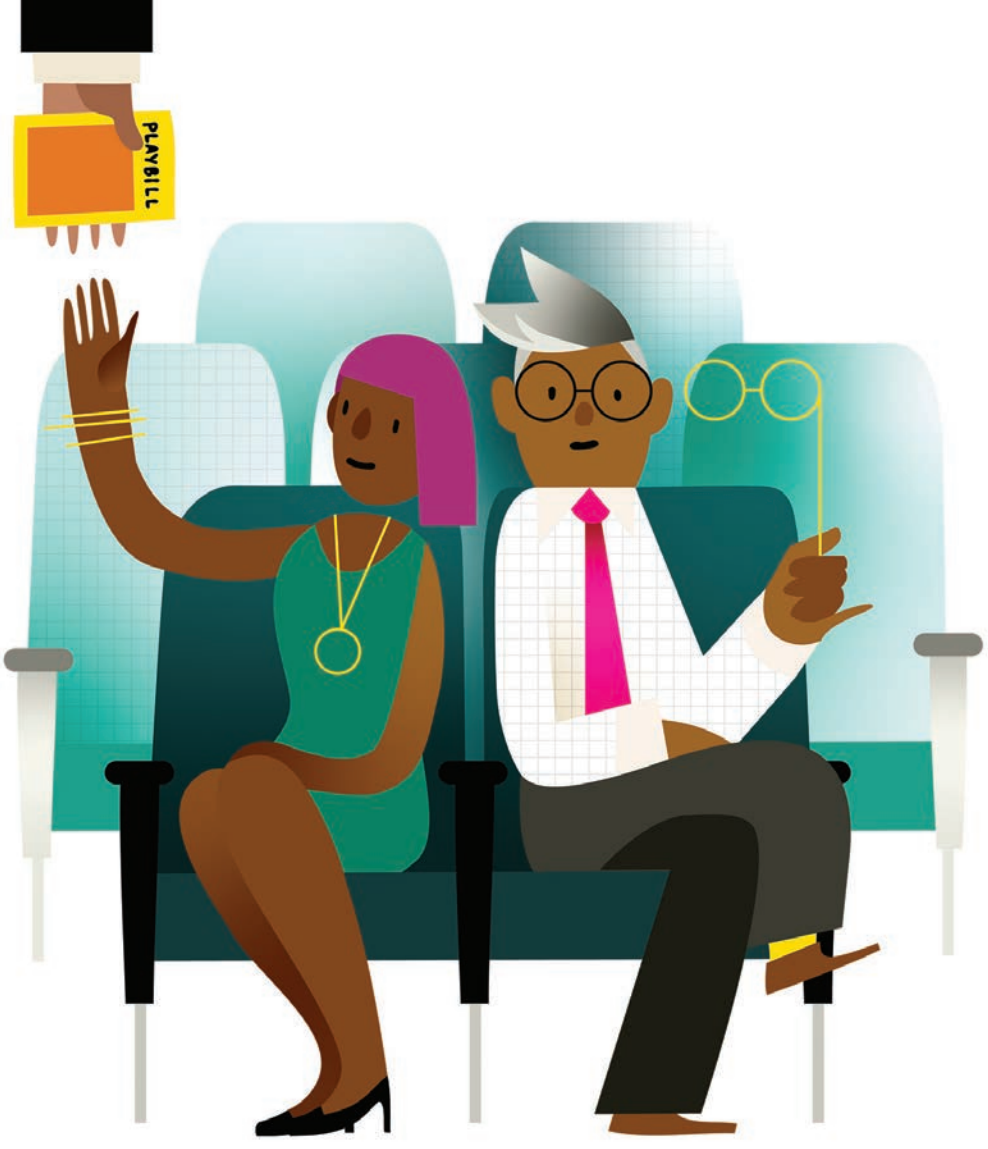
**Seek out stores with 'smart' technology**

Smart carts, which can be found at a growing number of supermarkets including Kroger and ShopRite, have sensors and scanners that keep a running tab on items you put in them, along with payment systems, so that you can bypass a register altogether.

Whole Foods Market has been testing Dash Cart, its own version of a smart cart, since 2022.

Some smaller regional chains are also getting into the smart cart game, including some Save Mart and Lucky stores, both of them part of a 194-store chain in California and western Nevada.

At some retailers, you don't even need to use a smart cart to avoid standing in a checkout line. Technology developed by Amazon called Just Walk Out is showing up in convenience stores, entertainment venues, sports stadiums, and more. It uses computer vision, cameras, and sensors to track your purchases. You scan a credit card or mobile wallet when you enter, shop, then just leave. Your purchases are automatically charged to the payment method you chose.




## Score Reservations and Tickets

Tired of missing out on exhibition openings and seats at top-rated restaurants? Solutions ahead.

**Join a presale list**

Tickets to events like concerts often go on sale early to fans, usually as a reward for their membership or customer loyalty. Set up a Ticketmaster account if you don't have one so that when tickets go on sale, you'll be ready with your payment and contact info. Then make sure to mark all of the artists, performers, and sports teams as "favorites" so it can deliver information to you about future sales.

Also, go to the websites of local live performance venues to subscribe to their newsletters for presale alerts. And sign up on the websites of artists you'd like to see perform to get presale notices. Sports teams may also give fans on their email list early access to tickets; go to their websites to sign up.

**Become a member**

The cost of an annual membership to a museum or other cultural institution typically can get you free admission over the course of a year and early access to show openings, special programs, guest tickets, and more. An $83 membership at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, for example, grants early access to museum events, discounts to the Alliance Theatre and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra,

and other perks. A $100 membership to the Public Theater in New York City earns you priority access to performances before the general public, waived fees on tickets, and free ticket exchanges, among other benefits.

**Book a table at popular restaurants**

The only way to wrangle a table at some dining places is by using a digital reservation system like OpenTable or Resy.

No openings? Go to the website (or call) to find out when the restaurant opens up tables on these apps. Some release reservations for an entire month on the first day of the previous month, while others open them up every night at midnight for the corresponding date one month ahead. Book the minute they make tables available. If one isn't available through Resy, hit the "Notify" button to be alerted if a reservation opens up.

**Get passes to tourist attractions**

Before you take off on a trip, go to the website of places you want to visit. Entry into some national parks, like Arches in Utah, requires a pass you may need to buy well in advance. Must-see spots abroad like the Colosseum in Rome can book out months in advance, so it's essential to get online reservations early.

## AVOID LONG VOTING LINES

**TAKE ADVANTAGE OF EARLY OR MAIL-IN VOTING**

You may have already done this if you live in a state with these options. If not, check with your local or state election office by phone or online. Or search for details by your address on the website of the League of Women Voters Education Fund (vote411.org) to find your best polling station options

"Lines tend to be longer on the first and last day of early voting," says Rachel Orey, director of the Bipartisan Policy Center's Elections Project. Lines also tend to be longer right when polls open, she says, then ease up over the course of the day.

**PICK THE BEST TIME TO VOTE IN PERSON**

Before going to vote, check with your election office to see if it provides wait times at its polling locations via online tools or mobile apps. Counties in California, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Missouri, and Texas have provided that info for past elections. Otherwise, remember that the longest lines tend to be before and after regular working hours and during lunchtime. "Go between 1:30 and 3:30 p.m. if you can," says Jeanette Senecal, senior director of mission impact for the League of Women Voters of the United States.

**FIND ALTERNATE POLLING LOCATIONS**

Some areas, especially those in larger cities, offer multiple polling sites where you can cast your ballot. For example, some community centers and colleges and universities have voting locations for residents and students. Penn State offers mail-in boxes and early voting for residents of Centre County and day-of voting for students. The University of Michigan has two polling locations run by the city clerk's office in Ann Arbor for residents and students. Ask your local election authority to see if alternate polling spots that tend to have shorter lines are available to you.

CR's GUIDE TO

# GETTING RID OF BA

# D SMELLS

Moldy bathrooms. Last night's fish dinner. Your dog's latest "accident." If you have a stink in your house, we'll tell you how to do away with it fast. **by Janet Siroto**

# LIFE IS FULL OF SMELLS,

both the good (think fresh-baked cookies) and the bad—like the lingering odor of overcooked brussels sprouts. And spritzing your place with a scented spray, lighting fragrant candles, or using an aromatic plug-in product can just make things worse, layering yet another smell on top of that nasty one. Experts say the solution is not to cover up these stinks but to take the right steps to eliminate them. Here are the worst household stenches we know of and the best ways to make them go away.

## Food Odors

***Whether your kitchen is marinating in the smell of burnt microwave popcorn or sautéed garlic, this expert advice can help.***

▶ **THE FIX** For a stinky fridge, remove anything that smells like it's spoiled and toss it into an outdoor trash receptacle, not your kitchen garbage bin. If you're still sniffing a bad smell, placing an open box of baking soda or a bowl of activated charcoal inside the fridge can absorb milder odors. But if a powerful stench has permeated it–like that of a package of meat forgotten on a back shelf–empty the fridge and freezer for a deep clean. That means removing and washing trays and shelves with hot, soapy water or an all-purpose household cleaner such as Simple Green, at right. (As with all cleaning products, follow the manufacturers' instructions closely.) Wash the interior of the refrigerator, including the door and gasket, with hot water with a bit of baking soda mixed in. Finally, wipe it all down with a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented liquid chlorine bleach in a gallon of water. Let the appliance air out for 15 minutes before putting your food back in. And if strong cooking smells are hanging on, run your vented range hood if you have one (ideally during and after meal-making). This helps rid the air of odors–as well as smoke, grease, and the potentially harmful volatile organic compounds that heating food to high temperatures releases, says Shelly Miller, PhD, professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Colorado Boulder. Range hood or not, open one or more windows. About that burnt popcorn (or other) smell from the microwave: Check your owner's manual for advice. Or zap a cup of water mixed with a tablespoon of lemon juice or vinegar for 2 to 5 minutes. Wait 30 seconds and wipe out the machine's interior with a clean cloth.

▶ **STILL STINKY?** Before refilling your fridge with food, sprinkle fresh activated charcoal or baking soda onto a couple of rimmed cookie sheets, and slide them into the bottom of the unit and its freezer. After 24 hours, wipe down the inside with a 1:1 solution of plain vinegar and water, and air it out. For a persistently smelly microwave, leaving an open box of baking soda inside overnight may erase the stink. If not, the odor may have saturated the filter; check your manual for replacement instructions.

▶ **DON'T DO IT** Skip scented odor-covering or neutralizing sprays, unless the fragrances on the ingredients list are natural, says Consumer Reports chemist Eric Boring, PhD. And only use sprays that are labeled for kitchen use and have natural propellants.

### ▼ FOOD STINK STOPPERS

**Arm & Hammer Baking Soda**
87¢, walmart.com

**Simple Green All-Purpose Cleaner**
32 oz., $4.47, walmart.com

**Airhood Portable Range Hood**
$160 to $200, theairhood.com



WORSE BETTER | CR RECOMMENDED

# Pet Smells

***Litter boxes, pee or poop accidents, the stink of wet fur. You don't have to endure constant animal smells. Here's how to neutralize the badness.***

▶ **THE FIX** For a general "a pet lives here" smell, consider an odor-neutralizing spray such as Febreze, below, which has ingredients that encapsulate the compounds causing the odor, says Bill Wuest, PhD, professor of chemistry at Emory University in Atlanta: "Think of it as a sponge that can absorb odor." Sprinkling baking soda on rugs and carpets a half-hour or more before vacuuming (ideally, using a device with a HEPA filter) also helps. For more potent and persistent smells–especially cat and dog urine on carpeting or upholstery–acting fast is key. The Carpet and Rug Institute recommends blotting the spot with white rags (washable white cloths are also an option), then using a clean towel or cloth to apply a solution of ¼ teaspoon of a lanolin- and bleach-free liquid dishwashing detergent in a cup of tepid water. Blot, rinse, and repeat until there's no sign or smell of urine. An enzymatic laundry product to break down stinky uric acid into gasses that evaporate (such as Nature's Miracle Laundry Boost, $9.30, chewy.com) is another way to banish pet urine odors. Enzymatics may have the word "enzyme" on their label or list the enzymes they contain–look for ingredients that end in "ase." (A note: Like many similar products, Febreze and Nature's Miracle don't specify what's in their fragrances, and some of these ingredients may cause allergic reactions or other health problems, according to Boring.) Is your cat's litter box an olfactory assault? Mixing in some activated charcoal with the litter absorbs smells, Boring says. His pick is Coir Wonder Coconut Shell Activated Charcoal, below.

▶ **STILL STINKY?** A carpet cleaner (often rentable at hardware and pet supply stores) and an enzymatic cleaner, such as Simple Solution Stain & Odor Remover, $25, petco.com, should be able to freshen up most still-smelly floor coverings. If your rug,

## TAKE ACTION FAST IF YOU SNIFF ...

### ROTTEN EGGS

This could be a natural gas leak, which could lead to an explosion. Don't do anything involving electricity (even flipping on the lights), and leave—now. Close the door of your home and get at least 300 feet away. Then call 911 and your gas company's emergency line.

### SMOKE

Unless you can quickly identify and deal with the source (like a pot of stew left cooking too long), get out and call the fire department. If the issue is on the simpler side—say, a burned saucepan that has smoked up your kitchen—turn off the stove, open the windows to let in fresh air, and place packets or bowls of activated charcoal around the room. Sprinkle baking soda on nearby floor coverings and let it sit overnight. Vacuum the next day to help remove any remaining odor.

### BURNING PLASTIC

This smell may signal some overheated wiring in an electrical appliance or your heating, ventilation, and air conditioning system. If you also see any smoke or sparks, leave the house and call 911. Otherwise, shut off the appropriate circuit breaker and contact an electrician ASAP.

▼ **PET STINK STOPPERS**

**Coir Wonder Coconut Shell Activated Charcoal**
$12.90, coirlitter.com

**Febreze Fabric 0% Perfume**
$14.08, Amazon

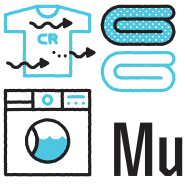
74 OVERALL SCORE

**✔ Shark CarpetXpert EX201 Carpet Cleaner**
$300, sharkclean.com

PHOTOS, PREVIOUS SPREAD: GETTY IMAGES (3); JUAN MOYANO/STOCKSY (TOILET PAPER). ILLUSTRATIONS, THIS SPREAD: TAMER KOSELLI. PHOTOS, THIS SPREAD: SCOTT MEADOWS/CONSUMER REPORTS (4); MANUFACTURERS (2)

carpeting, or upholstered furniture remains pungent, professional cleaning is probably your best bet.

**DON'T DO IT** The Humane Society of America advises against using ammonia or vinegar; their strong smells may encourage your pet to mark the area again. And don't use a steam cleaner—the heat can set the stain.



# Mustiness

***This smell is caused by mold, mildew, potentially harmful black mold, and other related fungi. They all thrive where there's condensation, leaks, or frequent steam.***

**THE FIX** In bathrooms, dispatch mildew on hard surfaces with a shower cleaner or an all-purpose cleaner (such as Clorox Free & Clear Multi-Surface Spray Cleaner, $4.98, homedepot.com) and machine-wash discolored shower curtains and liners. Running your bathroom fan for about 20 minutes before and after you shower also subdues fungi growth, says Melissa Dilkes Pateras, author of "A Dirty Guide to a Clean Home: Housekeeping Hacks You Can't Live Without" (The Dial Press, 2023). If your washing machine has a mildewy odor—common in front-loaders—clean it well, following the manufacturer's instructions. (GE, for instance, advises wiping down gaskets with a cloth and soapy water or going over them with a toothbrush dipped in white vinegar.) For mildewy or otherwise stinky clothes and towels, Pateras likes laundry boosters. These include EnviroKlenz Liquid Laundry Enhancer, $24.99, walmart.com, and Zero Odor Laundry Odor Eliminator, below. As for a musty basement, check for dampness on walls or soggy carpeting—water leaks you're not aware of may have caused mold to grow. Start vanquishing it by opening windows and running fans in the area. Sprinkle baking soda on smelly floor coverings and then vacuum it up to help remove moisture and odors, says Brian Sansoni, senior vice president of communications, outreach, and membership at the American Cleaning Institute. Follow that by wiping down basement walls, shelves, and other hard surfaces with a clean cloth and a solution of no more than 1 cup of bleach diluted in a gallon of water. Also, run a dehumidifier and place several containers of a moisture removal product (like DampRid, below) in the room to absorb airborne water.

**STILL STINKY?** In your bathroom, make sure the fan is working well—a square of toilet paper should cling when floated up to a running fan, Pateras says. If it doesn't, clean the filter with soap and water or your vacuum. For your washer, CR recommends running a cleaning cycle; if your machine doesn't have one, run it empty on the hottest water-temperature setting with chlorine bleach. Still sniffing a mildewy odor? Your washer may need a new pump filter; if it's accessible (check the owner's manual), you can try cleaning it before buying a replacement. If your basement remains musty, you may need a plumber or contractor to deal with the source of the moisture.

**DON'T DO IT** If your home is unrelentingly musty or you have unexplained headaches or respiratory symptoms, see a doctor and call a mold remediation specialist. The Environmental Protection Agency also advises the latter if you find an area of black mold larger than 10 square feet.

## MUSTINESS STINK STOPPERS

**DampRid Fragrance Free Refillable Moisture Remover**
$9.99, Amazon

**Zero Odor Laundry Odor Eliminator**
3-pack, $32.99, zeroodor.com

92 OVERALL SCORE

**Midea MAD35S1QWT Dehumidifier**
$230, Amazon

## BATHROOM STINK STOPPERS

**Bio-Clean**
2 lb., $49.99, Amazon

**Drain Weasel**
$6.98, homedepot.com



WORSE BETTER | CR RECOMMENDED

# Bathroom Stink

***A sewage-like odor wafting out of a bathroom sink or shower drain (or basement floor drain) can be icky. But it's also easy to get rid of.***

▶ **THE FIX** If the smell seems to be more than simply a toilet that needs freshening, the culprit could be a dried-out P-trap, the U-shaped curve in the pipe under a sink. These generally have some water in them, which stops sewer gas—malodorous fumes from wastewater—from infiltrating your home. But in infrequently used drains, like that of a guest bathroom sink, the water may dry up and allow sewer gas in. If running the faucet briefly resolves the problem, do this for a minute or two weekly or biweekly to keep the P-trap moist. In a shower or tub, the odor may be from an unseen glob made up of stuff like hair, bacteria, skin cells, and shampoo, gunking up pipes and slowing or clogging the drain. To remove it, Pateras recommends a snake-like DIY tool such as the Drain Weasel to yank out the mess. Another option is an enzymatic drain cleaner like Bio-Clean; this type of product takes at least several hours to work. (See both on the facing page.)

▶ **STILL STINKY?** If the potty fumes persist, call a plumber. You could have an issue such as a leak in the P-trap.

▶ **DON'T DO IT** Caustic drain cleaners like Drano and Thrift may harm very old or rusted pipes or light-gauge plastic, under-sink replacement pipes. Anyone who uses these should do so with caution: They can cause chemical burns if they come into contact with skin, and some emit harmful fumes.

## 3 MYSTERY ODORS, SOLVED

How to figure out where that stench is coming from and then make it go away

*Smells like ...*

### DIRTY SOCKS

This odor could be due to bacteria that can thrive in central air conditioning system coils, says environmental engineer Ian Cull, chief science officer at Indoor Science, an indoor air-quality consulting service based in Aurora, Ill. If that's the case, an HVAC contractor can come in and clean and seal the system to help prevent such fumes in the future.

*Smells like ...*

### FRUIT

Mold usually smells musty and earthy but may sometimes give off more of a sweet, fruity (or tangy) odor. For any suspected mold, if you're not sure of the source, check spots that aren't always in your line of vision, like under the kitchen or bathroom sink. A leak that has allowed mold to grow may be hidden behind cleaning products stashed there.

*Smells like ...*

### DECAYING CABBAGE

If it's not, in fact, old cabbage, you may have a dead mouse (or other small creature) in your home. Can't find the critter? It may be decaying inside a wall or ceiling. You can wait out the couple of weeks it will take for it to decompose and stop stinking (an odor-eliminating spray may provide temporary relief) or call an exterminator.

ILLUSTRATIONS: TAMER KOSELLI. PHOTOS: SCOTT MEADOWS/CONSUMER REPORTS (3); MANUFACTURERS (2); GETTY IMAGES (1)

# KEEP YOUR MONEY SAFE— FOR LIFE

Inflation and stock market ups and down have you worried about your economic future? We've got some reassuring answers to your thorniest questions.

**BY PENELOPE WANG**
**PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY KLAWE RZECZY**

If you're retired, you've probably been spending more time with family and friends, traveling, or perhaps working on your backhand or golf swing. But with the uncertainties of the stock market and higher prices at the grocery store and elsewhere, you may have also experienced anxious moments when thinking about your money and whether you'll have enough.

It's a concern many people are feeling these days. A recent survey by the Employee Benefit Research Institute found that more than one-third of retirees said their travel, entertainment, or leisure expenses were higher than anticipated. And 1 of 4 said they lacked the confidence that they'll have enough money to be comfortable for the rest of their lives.

That's why it's a good time to review your financial strategy. To help, we've got answers to seven questions you may have had recently. They should put your mind at ease.

## Q: I'm worried that my savings won't produce enough income for me. How can I make sure I won't run out of money?

Look at your monthly budget by running your income and expenses through an online retirement calculator such as those offered by Bankrate and T. Rowe Price. This will give you estimates showing how long your money is likely to last.

Then review the mix of stocks and bonds in your portfolio. Most people should have a balanced mix, which will provide steady income as well as long-term growth, says William Bernstein, an investment adviser and author of "The Four Pillars of Investing" (McGraw Hill, 2023).

To fine-tune your portfolio, you might want to hire a fee-only certified financial planner, who can help you build a plan based on your needs. You should update it every year. To find someone, try the search tools at websites like napfa.org, letsmakeaplan.org, and garrettplanningnetwork.com.

## Q: We're on edge about the possibility of a big drop in the market. Should we get out?

No one can predict when the next bear market will hit, but it's wise not to take unnecessary risks with your portfolio. That may mean holding a larger portion in bonds, Bernstein says. They're generally more stable than stocks because they pay a specific yield and you get your principal back at maturity.

That said, you still need to hold a

stake in stocks because they offer more potential long-term growth, which can help you keep up with inflation. Some stocks also pay a dividend, giving you additional income.

For greater safety, consider (if you can) setting aside a cash account of one to five years of living expenses. With that buffer, you won't be forced to tap your portfolio at market lows. Keep that money in a safe, easily accessible place, such as a bank savings account.

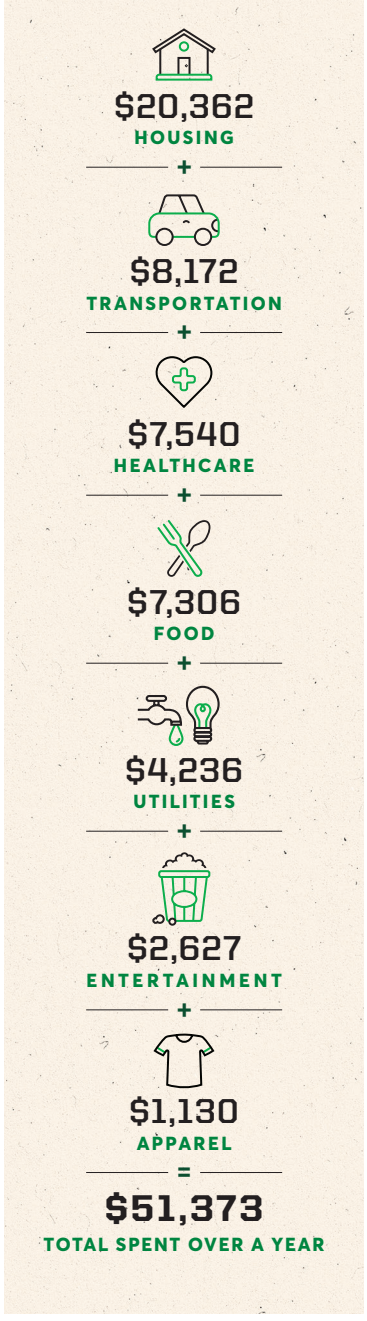
## Q: How much can I safely withdraw each year from my accounts without taking out too much?

One common rule calls for taking out about 4 percent of your portfolio in the first year of retirement (which may seem pretty low) but then adjusting that amount for inflation (which came in at 3.9 percent in 2023) in following years. So if you have $1 million in savings, you could withdraw $40,000 in the first year, then increase that amount by, say, 3 percent to $41,200 the following year. Historical data shows that with this approach, you're unlikely to run out of money over 30 years.

But many people want to take a more flexible approach to their annual income. If so, "assess your portfolio and income amounts annually, then decide on your spending rate," says Jonathan Clements, editor of "My Money Journey" (Harriman House, 2023) and founder of the HumbleDollar website. In years when you suffer losses, you'll need to decrease your spending the following year, and in years following bull markets, you may be able to splurge a bit. "Be sure you have a realistic picture, and be ready to cut back when it's necessary," he says.

## HERE'S WHAT RETIREES SPEND MONEY ON

The average pretax income for people ages 65 or older is $60,359, according to federal data.* Where does that money go? Here's a yearly spending breakdown for major categories:




## Q: I want to pay for my kids' weddings in the next few years. How do I save for that?

How to plan for both expected and unexpected big-ticket expenditures? As part of the cash buffer you set aside, budget enough to pay for one or two major expenditures a year, Clements says.

To boost your cash savings, you could take on part-time work. (Depending on your other income, this could have tax implications.) A recent T. Rowe Price study found that about 20 percent of Americans work either full- or part-time after reaching retirement age. Roughly half do so for financial reasons, while 45 percent choose to work for the social and emotional benefits.

## Q: With rising prices, how can I maintain my standard of living?

Keeping a stake in stocks remains your best shot at staying ahead of inflation over the long term, says Allan Roth, a certified financial planner in Colorado Springs, Colo. Granted, you may experience sharp downturns along the way. Still, over the past 30 years, stocks as measured by the S&P 500 average have returned an annualized 10.2 percent, while inflation has averaged 2.5 percent.

To keep up with inflation with less risk of volatility, Roth also recommends Treasury Inflation-Protected Securities (TIPS), which are federally guaranteed bonds with returns that track the consumer price index, a measure of inflation. Though the principal value fluctuates, at maturity you'll receive an increased inflation-adjusted price or the original principal value, whichever

*Of households headed by someone 65 or older.

is greater. (You'll never get less.) You can buy individual TIPS bonds at treasurydirect.gov or through a brokerage firm. You can also invest through a TIPS fund such as Vanguard Inflation-Protected Securities (VIPSX).

Another way to stay ahead is to make the kind of big-picture changes you've likely been thinking about but have been putting off, like downsizing or moving to a place with lower taxes. Or maybe you can become a one-car family to save money on insurance and upkeep.

## Q: I retired early and claimed Social Security, but now I'm going back to work. Will I be penalized?

Yes, but only if you're under the full retirement age (67 for those born in 1960 or later). In that case, your benefit may be reduced by $1 for every $2 you earn above the annual limit, which is $22,300 for 2024. But your earnings will no longer be reduced once you reach full retirement age, says Michael Piper, a certified public accountant and founder of Open Social Security, a free online Social Security calculator.

But no matter how old you are, your Social Security benefits are taxable, with the amount of tax based on your income whether it's earned from paid work or investments. If your income is above $25,000 (for single filers) or $32,000 (for married joint filers), as much as 85 percent of your benefit is taxable. And nine states—Colorado, Connecticut, Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, and West Virginia—

# 3 WAYS TO GET CASH NOW

Got a large, unexpected bill, perhaps for home repairs or a medical procedure? You really don't want to take on debt in retirement, so loans usually aren't a good solution. Here are three alternatives.

### LOOK TO YOUR PORTFOLIO

Your best option may be to make withdrawals from your portfolio, first from your Roth IRA, if you have one, because you generally don't have to pay taxes on those funds. Second best is to take money from stocks and/or bonds, although doing this will have tax consequences. The amount you'll pay depends on how long you've held the assets, the amount you paid for them, and your taxable income.

Finally, assets that you pull from a 401(k) or traditional IRA are taxed as ordinary income. So before you do, it's best to consult a tax pro, who may suggest strategies for reducing the tax bite.

### SELL SOME STUFF YOU DON'T CARE ABOUT

You probably own things that can be sold for cash. To gauge how much your items could bring in, compare prices for similar products at websites like AptDeco, eBay, and the RealReal. Then sell them yourself at one of those places or another outlet.

For more valuable items, hire an appraiser first. To find one, search on the websites of the Appraisers Association of America, the American Society of Appraisers, or the International Society of Appraisers. An appraiser should charge a flat or hourly fee, not a percentage of the item's value. The cost could run $200 an hour or more for someone with experience.

### LOWER SOME EXPENSES

A major cost may be high home and car insurance premiums. Perhaps you can lower them by switching insurers or raising your deductible, says Carolyn McClanahan, a certified financial planner in Jacksonville, Fla. Or maybe you can cash in a no-longer-needed life insurance policy. But check with a financial adviser first to find out the tax ramifications and determine your coverage needs.

also separately tax Social Security benefits, according to AARP data. (Social Security's definition of income includes your adjusted gross income and half of your benefit plus tax-exempt interest.)

## Q: To save money, I want to switch my Medicare plan. When can I do this?

You can change plans during Medicare's next open enrollment period, which runs from Oct. 15 through Dec. 7. Even if you don't intend to switch, it's important to review your coverage annually because there may be cost and benefit changes.

Say you have original Medicare (Part A for hospitals and Part B for doctors) but also buy a Medigap plan (supplemental coverage that helps pay the 20 percent of costs not covered by original Medicare) and a prescription drug plan (Part D). You can change into new Medigap or Part D plans that better suit your need for coverage or your ability to afford them.

If you have new prescriptions or your insurer changed the cost and level of coverage, you could save money by switching Part D plans. As for Medigap, most states offer at least 10 plan options.

But while original Medicare plus Medigap plans may offer the most robust coverage in the event you have a chronic health problem, the cost can be high. Medigap plans can run about $200 a month. So consider an all-in-one Medicare Advantage plan. After all, the premiums for Medicare Advantage can be low or even zero, and the plans cap out-of-pocket costs. But make sure you understand the limits of these plans, which typically restrict you to a network of providers and hospitals. By contrast, original Medicare gives you access to any provider that takes Medicare.

If you're already in a Medicare Advantage plan and you aren't happy with it, you can switch to another Advantage plan. (There's also a separate Medicare Advantage enrollment period, which runs from Jan. 1 through March 31.) Again, be sure to check the available providers and coverage rules because they vary.

What if you're in a Medicare Advantage plan and want to switch to original Medicare? Although it's allowed during the annual open enrollment period, it might not be affordable if you also want to buy a Medigap plan. That's because your guaranteed right to purchase a Medigap plan is available only at initial enrollment. In most states, if you try to buy a Medigap plan later, you may be denied or could be subject to underwriting, which could raise premium prices.

For more details, go to the plan finder tools at medicare.gov. There's also a 24-hour help line at 800-633-4227. And you can get free Medicare counseling through your State Health Insurance Assistance Program. To find yours, go to shiphelp.org.

**To save money, review Medicare coverage every year.**

# ROAD REPORT

NEWS & EXPERT ADVICE TO KEEP YOU AHEAD OF THE CURVE™

## Toyota Crown Signia

The Crown Signia SUV offers improvements over the Crown sedan, such as a taller roof that improves visibility and makes the vehicle easier to enter, plus the convenience of a larger cargo area and rear liftgate. **CR'S TAKE** With its hybrid powertrain, decent driving characteristics, and upscale interior, the Crown Signia is a compelling choice. Among its chief virtues: a roomy cabin, comfy seats, an EPA-estimated 38 mpg combined, and a generous roster of safety equipment.

FIRST DRIVE

**BASE PRICE RANGE** $43,590-$47,990
**DESTINATION CHARGE** $1,395
**PRICE AS DRIVEN** $49,385

PHOTO: TOYOTA

SAFETY MATTERS

## 6 Ways to Keep Your Car From Being Stolen

Car thefts have risen since 2019, with more than **1 million stolen** last year, according to the National Insurance Crime Bureau. The cars most often stolen were the Kia Optima, Chevrolet Silverado 1500, Kia Soul, and Hyundai Elantra and Sonata. Some thefts were spurred by **social media posts** that showed how to steal those specific models. To keep your car safe: Never leave a running car unattended, never leave keys in the car, and always park in well-lit areas, hide valuables, close windows, and lock doors.

ASK OUR EXPERTS

## What's the least pricey way to get small dents fixed?

Small dings don't require the kind of expensive equipment you typically find at body shops to repair. While shops can do the work, they will charge a premium for performing such minor fixes. Instead, consider using what's called a paintless dent removal (PDR) service to save money. "These are businesses that use suction cups, levers, and other tools to gently smooth out dents and dings without damaging the car's paint," says Michael Crossen, a mechanic at CR's Auto Test Center. PDR repairs typically cost between $50 and $500. To find a local technician, Google "paintless dent repair near me."

THE VITAL STATISTIC

## $424

**The average cost in 2023 to fix what's causing the check-engine light to illuminate.** This warning can signal several different types of problems, including worn engine parts like spark plugs and electronics that have gone offline.

**Source:** The Zebra.

RECALL

## Kia

Kia America is recalling over 460,000 Telluride SUVs from the 2020-2024 model years because the slide knob used to operate the front power seat can get stuck, causing the motor to overheat and potentially risking a fire. Owners are advised to park outside, away from structures and other vehicles, until the recall repair is complete. **WHAT TO DO** Dealerships will install a bracket for the power seat switch back covers and replace the seat slide knobs, free of charge. For more information, call Kia customer service at 800-333-4542.

ILLUSTRATION BY KIERSTEN ESSENPREIS

# THE SAFEST CARS YOU CAN BUY RIGHT NOW

**We share the models built to protect you (with the advances shown here) and the ones that won't.**

**by Keith Barry / Photo Illustrations by Eric Heintz**

**AEB With Pedestrian Detection**
An automatic emergency braking system that avoids collisions with both pedestrians and other vehicles.
**Simple Controls and Displays**
Touchscreens and controls that keep the driver's attention on the road are essential.
**Braking Performance**
Some vehicles can stop 25 feet shorter than others in the same category—the difference between a close call and a crash.

**Highway-Speed AEB**
This feature automatically brakes if it senses an imminent crash, avoiding impact or lessening the crash forces at high speeds.
**Blind Spot Warning**
This technology alerts drivers if it's unsafe to change lanes or merge when a vehicle is in their blind spot.
**Rear Cross Traffic Warning**
When reversing, this feature sounds an alert if it detects a vehicle approaching from the side.
**Emergency Handling**
The safest cars allow drivers to confidently maneuver around an obstacle at highway speeds without losing control.

**IN 2023 ALONE,** nearly 41,000 people were killed and 290,000 injured on U.S. roads, according to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates. But there is some good news: New cars are better than ever at keeping their occupants–and even people outside the car–safe. "The safest cars don't just protect passengers in a crash. They may avoid a crash in the first place," says Emily Thomas, PhD, manager of safety at CR's Auto Test Center. "They may also lower risks to pedestrians and people in other cars."

Our experts have come up with a list of the safest CR-tested cars and SUVs, based on key factors proved to make a car safer, along with government and insurance industry data and our own testing and analysis. These vehicles not only do well in crash tests but also come standard with technologies that can prevent crashes by automatically braking or warning drivers of an impending collision, and they excel in CR's tests for braking, handling, and ease of use.

# Which Car Protects You the Most?

"It's time to rethink a lot of conventional wisdom about automotive safety," says Jake Fisher, CR's senior director of auto testing. "Vehicle design and technology have evolved in recent years, and the old rules no longer apply. Just because a car is bigger doesn't mean it's safer."

CR's experts say there are three factors that matter most when it comes to safety: 1) A vehicle's ability to avoid a crash, 2) Its ability to protect occupants from harm if a collision does occur, and 3) Its ability to keep others on the road safer, including pedestrians and people in other cars.

## What Keeps Cars From Crashing

Advanced driver assistance systems (ADAS) help avoid crashes by sounding alarms and even engaging the brakes to avoid or lessen the impact of a collision when drivers don't respond in a high-risk situation. Three ADAS features you may have heard of–automatic emergency braking (AEB), blind spot warning (BSW), and rear cross traffic warning (RCTW)–are proved to be effective at preventing crashes, according to studies from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) and the Highway Loss Data Institute (HLDI).

Apart from safety technology, the laws of physics and a car's engineering also determine how easy it is for a driver to avoid a crash. For example, heavier vehicles tend to take longer to stop and taller vehicles tend to be harder to control in turns. On the other hand, cars with more advanced suspensions or better-tuned stability control make it easier to swerve around obstacles, Fisher says.

What does all of that mean when you're shopping for a new car? You can refer to the scores that vehicles earn in CR's braking and crash avoidance maneuver tests to choose a safer vehicle. "Vehicles that excel in CR's braking tests are more likely to give a driver a chance to stop in time, and vehicles that make it through CR's crash avoidance maneuver test at a high speed without losing control can help drivers evade obstacles," says Fisher.

Finally, a vehicle with confusing controls is more likely to require a driver to take their eyes off the road and hands off the wheel, says Kelly Funkhouser, associate director for vehicle technology at Consumer Reports. For example, some vehicles force drivers to use a finicky touchscreen to change the temperature or adjust the radio volume. "Poorly designed systems can make it dangerously distracting to do these basic tasks while driving," she says.

## What Protects the People Inside

When all else fails and a crash happens, the safest cars protect you in several ways, says CR's Thomas. "A car's structure has 'crumple zones' that are designed to be crushed in a crash, absorbing the impact and minimizing the crash forces on occupants," she says. "Then there are airbags and seat belts to keep occupants in place so that they don't strike the hard surfaces of the vehicle interior. And the integrity of the vehicle's structure prevents intrusion of your own vehicle–or another–into the passenger compartment."

To find out how well a vehicle will protect you in a crash, you can start by looking at its NHTSA (nhtsa.gov) crash-test ratings, which use a scale of one to five stars, printed on the window sticker of every new car. But you can learn even more by checking the safety rating provided by the insurance industry-funded IIHS (iihs.org), says Jennifer Stockburger, director of operations at CR's Auto Test Center. While NHTSA's rating criteria have remained the same for over a decade, the IIHS tests

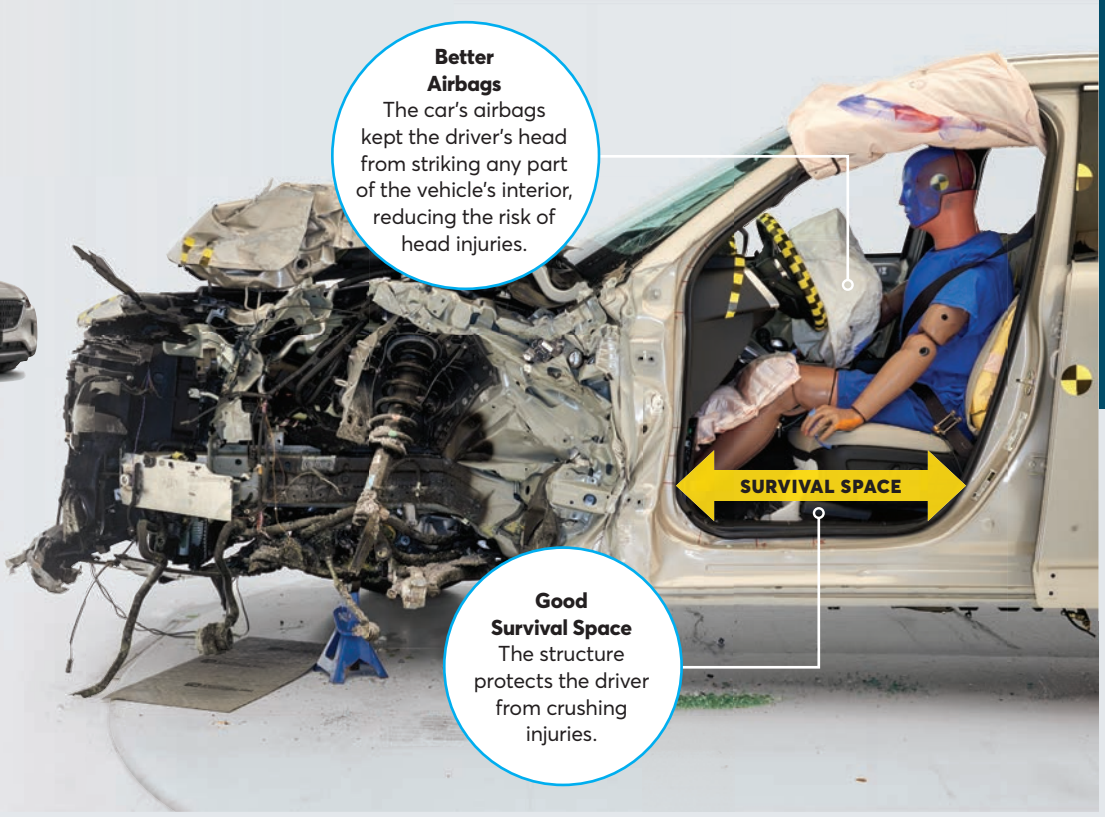
These images show two SUVs after they've undergone the IIHS' small-overlap front crash test, which replicates hitting a tree, a telephone pole, or the corner of an oncoming vehicle. While both of these midsized SUVs have met government safety standards, the results illustrate how some vehicles can offer better protection in a crash.

PHOTOS, PREVIOUS SPREAD: TOYOTA; SUBARU (CARS). PHOTOS, THIS PAGE: IIHS (CRASH TESTS)

MORE PROTECTION

# Mazda CX-90

**THE CX-90,** which was introduced as a new model in 2023, earned a Good score (the highest) in the IIHS test. It maintained a "survival space" that kept the crash-test dummy from being crushed and prevented chest, hip, leg, and foot injuries. The Mazda's airbags protected the dummy's head, as well.


Better Airbags
The car's airbags kept the driver's head from striking any part of the vehicle's interior, reducing the risk of head injuries.
SURVIVAL SPACE
Good Survival Space
The structure protects the driver from crushing injuries.

LESS PROTECTION

# Dodge Durango

**THE DURANGO** got its last major update in 2011. It earned a Marginal score for the driver side, which is the next-to-lowest rating. It didn't maintain an adequate "survival space" for the driver, and parts of the vehicle intruded into the cabin, increasing the risk of leg, foot, and hip injuries for the driver.

Inadequate Airbags
The car's curtain airbags didn't adequately protect the driver's head.
SURVIVAL SPACE
Inadequate Survival Space
Parts of the vehicle were able to intrude into the cabin, increasing the risk of injury.

have gotten tougher in recent years.

"The IIHS tests challenge vehicles in new ways that better replicate real-world crashes," Stockburger says. For example, as SUVs and pickups grew in popularity, the IIHS redesigned its side-impact test in 2021 to better predict how a vehicle would fare if it got hit by one of these taller models. The organization has also added rear-seat and passenger-side crash tests in recent years, and CR factors IIHS test results into a vehicle's Overall Score.

As a result, most automakers have improved the crash safety of their vehicles to meet these more stringent testing standards, Stockburger says, and cars today are much safer than they were just a decade ago.

In addition to crash-test results that range from Poor to Good, the IIHS also awards the Top Safety Pick and Top Safety Pick Plus designations to vehicles that excel across crash testing and crash avoidance measures. We've highlighted these vehicles in our list of the safest top-rated cars, at right. The criteria for these designations get tougher every year as well, raising the bar for all cars. For example, the Dodge Durango shown on page 49 got a Top Safety Pick award when it was first introduced in 2011 but lost it for 2015 after the IIHS added stricter test criteria.

## What Protects the People Outside

Car safety isn't just about protecting you and your passengers. It's also important to reduce the risk of injury for everyone else on the road, including pedestrians, cyclists, and occupants of other vehicles. According to the Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA), drivers struck and killed 7,318 people in the U.S. in 2023—only a small decrease from 2022 when 7,522 people in the U.S. were killed, marking a 40-year high in pedestrian fatalities.

What keeps people outside your auto safer? First, the type of vehicle you drive makes a difference. Research from the GHSA, the University of Illinois Springfield, and the IIHS shows that tall and boxy vehicles such as SUVs and pickup trucks pose an outsized danger to pedestrians and drivers of smaller vehicles because their front ends obscure visibility and are more likely to cause injuries to those they hit, while shorter and less-boxy vehicles pose less of a risk.

How much a vehicle weighs is also important. Although heavier vehicles tend to fare better in a collision than lighter ones because they can absorb more crash forces, heavy vehicles can pose greater risks to others on the road. "Large vehicles tend to be harder to handle in an emergency and need more distance to stop," says Thomas. "They're also more likely to cause injuries to pedestrians and occupants of a smaller vehicle in a crash."

That's why our list of the safest vehicles includes only those with good scores in our handling and braking distance tests, and standard AEB with pedestrian detection—a feature that reduces pedestrian-injury crash risk by 30 percent, according to an IIHS study. This and other crash-prevention technology, such as standard highway-speed AEB, BSW, and RCTW, can help make roads safer for everyone, says William Wallace, associate director of safety policy at CR—but only if it's universally available. Currently, 87 percent of 2024 vehicles have both highway-speed AEB and AEB that can also detect pedestrians, according to CR's analysis—but some heavy vehicles don't come standard with these features.

"Just like seat belts, every new vehicle should be required to come standard with the technology that is proved to save lives—particularly AEB," Wallace says.

# The Safest Top-Rated Cars

**These CR Recommended** vehicles are the safest 2024 models. They excel in crash avoidance by earning good scores in our braking performance, emergency handling, rollaway protection, and usability tests, and also have standard highway-speed AEB, AEB with pedestrian detection, blind spot warning, and rear cross traffic warning. And they have these protective features in every trim level—not just the priciest ones.

As part of our ratings, we've eliminated vehicles that score below four stars in NHTSA's crash tests and those with scores of Marginal or Poor, the second-lowest and lowest scores, respectively, in any of the IIHS' original crash tests. All the vehicles on our list also offer at least one year of free automatic crash notification (ACN)—a feature that NHTSA estimates could save more than 700 lives a year by automatically alerting first responders if an airbag deploys or sensors detect a crash. Currently, several brands charge as much as $20 a month for this feature.

All vehicles on this list meet the same safety criteria and are listed by Overall Score within their category. We've also indicated in **blue** the vehicles that achieve a Top Safety Pick Plus award from the IIHS, which indicates they have gotten high scores in both crash tests and evaluations of crash avoidance technology. Even among safe cars, they are safety standouts.

**Blind Spot Warning (BSW)**
Using sensors, it detects vehicles in adjacent lanes and alerts drivers to their presence, reducing lane-change crashes with injuries by 23 percent, according to data from the IIHS and HLDI.

## SMALL CARS

### Kia Niro PHEV
$34,390-$40,140
85 OVERALL SCORE

### Toyota Prius
$27,950-$36,365
80 OVERALL SCORE

### Kia Niro
$26,940-$34,490
79 OVERALL SCORE

### Mazda3
$24,170-$36,650
78 OVERALL SCORE

### Toyota Prius Prime
$32,975-$39,670
76 OVERALL SCORE

### Kia Niro Electric
$39,600-$44,600
71 OVERALL SCORE

## MIDSIZED CARS

### Honda Accord Hybrid
$32,895-$38,890
89 OVERALL SCORE

### Hyundai Sonata
$27,500-$34,950
74 OVERALL SCORE

## MINIVANS

### Kia Carnival
$36,500-$50,600
82 OVERALL SCORE

### Chrysler Pacifica
$39,400-$59,495
70 OVERALL SCORE

PHOTOS, TOP: FORD; KIA (CARS)

## SMALL SUVs

### Toyota RAV4 Prime
$43,960-$47,560

89 OVERALL SCORE

### Kia Sportage PHEV
$39,590-$44,090

87 OVERALL SCORE

### Hyundai Tucson Hybrid
$32,575-$39,715

85 OVERALL SCORE

### Hyundai Tucson
$27,500-$38,295

82 OVERALL SCORE

### Hyundai Tucson PHEV
$38,725-$45,450

82 OVERALL SCORE

### Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV
$40,345-$50,345

82 OVERALL SCORE

### Mitsubishi Outlander
$28,395-$40,845

77 OVERALL SCORE

### Mazda CX-50
$30,300-$43,300

76 OVERALL SCORE

### Mazda CX-5
$29,300-$40,600

75 OVERALL SCORE

### Ford Escape PHEV
$40,500

74 OVERALL SCORE

### Nissan Rogue
$28,850-$40,630

70 OVERALL SCORE

### Ford Escape Hybrid
$33,540-$37,960

70 OVERALL SCORE

### Mazda CX-30
$24,995-$36,800

67 OVERALL SCORE

PHOTOS, TOP: HYUNDAI; TOYOTA (CARS)

**Highway-Speed Automatic Emergency Braking (AEB)**
Some AEB systems work at highway speeds—typically above 55 mph. According to IIHS data, the technology cuts rear-end collisions by up to 50 percent when a vehicle is also equipped with forward collision warning (FCW), which alerts drivers to an imminent crash.

## MIDSIZED SUVs

### Ford Edge
$38,465-$47,205
79 OVERALL SCORE

### Honda Passport
$41,900-$47,970
70 OVERALL SCORE

## MIDSIZED SUVs (3-ROW)

### Toyota Highlander Hybrid
$40,970-$53,375
85 OVERALL SCORE

### Kia Telluride
$36,190-$53,385
84 OVERALL SCORE

### Hyundai Palisade
$36,650-$53,850
83 OVERALL SCORE

## MIDSIZED SUVs (3-ROW) CONTINUED

### Mazda CX-90
$37,845-$56,450
82 OVERALL SCORE

### Mazda CX-90 PHEV
$49,945-$57,950
80 OVERALL SCORE

### Toyota Highlander
$39,270-$51,675
80 OVERALL SCORE

### Toyota Grand Highlander
$39,270-$51,675
80 OVERALL SCORE

### Kia Sorento Hybrid
$38,690-$46,890
77 OVERALL SCORE

### Kia Sorento
$31,990-$47,390
72 OVERALL SCORE

**Rear Cross Traffic Warning (RCTW)** When the car is in Reverse, it uses sensors to detect vehicles (and often pedestrians) approaching from either side and warns a driver of their presence. According to the IIHS, RCTW cuts this kind of crash by 22 percent.

## LUXURY CARS

### Lexus ES Hybrid
$43,440-$52,330

88 OVERALL SCORE

### Lexus ES
$42,040-$50,930

82 OVERALL SCORE

### Toyota Crown
$40,350-$53,370

78 OVERALL SCORE

### Lexus IS
$40,085-$63,370

72 OVERALL SCORE

### Volvo S60
$42,450-$58,550

70 OVERALL SCORE

### Acura TLX
$45,000-$57,000

69 OVERALL SCORE

## LUXURY SMALL SUVs

### Lexus NX Hybrid
$43,465-$49,605

83 OVERALL SCORE

### Acura RDX
$44,350-$54,150

81 OVERALL SCORE

### BMW X1
$40,500-$49,900

79 OVERALL SCORE

### Lexus UX
$35,540-$44,370

78 OVERALL SCORE

### Lexus NX
$39,455-$49,355

72 OVERALL SCORE

### Lincoln Corsair
$38,990-$54,025

72 OVERALL SCORE

### Audi Q3
$37,400-$39,800

70 OVERALL SCORE

PHOTOS, TOP: HYUNDAI; KIA (CARS)

## LUXURY MIDSIZED SUVs

**BMW X5** ✓
$65,200-$122,300
92 OVERALL SCORE

**Lexus RX PHEV** ✓
$68,730
89 OVERALL SCORE

**BMW X5 PHEV** ✓
$73,100
88 OVERALL SCORE

**Lexus TX Hybrid** ✓
$68,000-$76,700
87 OVERALL SCORE

**Lexus RX Hybrid** ✓
$50,450-$59,580
83 OVERALL SCORE

**Porsche Cayenne** ✓
$79,200-$196,300
81 OVERALL SCORE

**Lexus RX** ✓
$48,600-$62,450
78 OVERALL SCORE

**BMW X7** ✓
$81,900-$149,400
78 OVERALL SCORE

**Lexus TX** ✓
$53,700-$61,000
77 OVERALL SCORE

**Audi Q7** ✓
$59,500-$65,300
77 OVERALL SCORE

**Infiniti QX60** ✓
$49,650-$66,100
70 OVERALL SCORE

## ELECTRIC VEHICLES

**BMW iX** ✓
$87,100-$111,500
84 OVERALL SCORE

**Hyundai Ioniq 6** ✓
$37,500-$53,650
83 OVERALL SCORE

**Kia EV9** ✓
$54,900-$73,900
79 OVERALL SCORE

**Kia EV6** ✓
$42,600-$61,600
77 OVERALL SCORE

**Genesis GV60** ✓
$52,000-$69,550
75 OVERALL SCORE

**Lexus RZ** ✓
$54,000-$64,430
74 OVERALL SCORE

**Audi Q8 E-Tron** ✓
$74,400-$92,600
71 OVERALL SCORE

**Audi Q4 E-Tron** ✓
$49,800-$58,200
71 OVERALL SCORE

**Ford Mustang Mach-E** ✓
$39,995-$53,995
70 OVERALL SCORE

# The Cars That Are Less Safe

**Although these 10** vehicles meet federal safety regulations, they lack two or more of the minimum qualities we think safe cars should have, including standard AEB with pedestrian detection and good scores in each of our braking, emergency handling, rollaway risk, and usability tests. None are CR Recommended.

One of the reasons the Mitsubishi Mirage is on this list is that it is extremely light. "No matter how many safety features a car has, there's no escaping the realities of physics," says CR's Thomas. "In a crash with a larger vehicle, a smaller vehicle is more likely to bear the brunt of crash damage."

But large trucks and SUVs also pose safety risks. Many on this list have low braking and emergency handling scores and lack pedestrian AEB.

## Dodge Durango
$39,670-$95,995

Low score in CR's emergency handling test; AEB with pedestrian detection unavailable.

## Jeep Wrangler
$31,995-$91,545

Low braking and emergency handling scores; AEB with pedestrian detection unavailable.

## Chevrolet Tahoe
$54,600-$79,400

Low scores in CR's braking and emergency handling tests.

## GMC Yukon
$58,200-$98,755

Low scores in CR's braking and emergency handling tests.

## Toyota Sequoia
$61,275-$81,265

Low scores in CR's braking and emergency handling tests.

## Land Rover Defender
$56,400-$118,600

Low scores in CR's braking and emergency handling tests.

## Lincoln Navigator
$83,265-$114,095

Low scores in CR's braking and emergency handling tests.

## GMC Sierra 1500
$37,700-$82,500

Low scores in CR's braking and emergency handling tests.

## Mitsubishi Mirage
$16,695-$19,595

Low score in CR's emergency handling test; weighs just 2,084 pounds.

## Chevrolet Silverado 1500
$36,800-$69,900

Low scores in CR's braking and emergency handling tests.

LUXURY ELECTRIC CARS

## BMW i5

A Marvelous Drive Marred Only by Confusing Controls

**86** OVERALL SCORE

**ROAD-TEST SCORE** 94

**HIGHS** Absorbent ride, sharp handling, short stopping distances, quiet cabin, comfortable front seats, high-quality materials

**LOWS** Distracting controls

**POWERTRAIN** 590-hp, dual electric motors; 1-speed direct drive; AWD

**RANGE** 295 miles

**PRICE** $67,100-$84,100 base price
+ $1,175 destination charge
**Total MSRP as tested** $91,695

**THE i5** is the electric version of BMW's iconic 5 Series midsized luxury sedan. The top-level M60 trim (the first version available) proved to be one of the best cars we've tested—electric or otherwise. It's quick and agile through corners yet rides serenely down the highway. If only the controls were simpler.

With 590 hp from dual electric motors, there's a ton of near-silent power, and the i5 rockets from 0 to 60 mph in 3.5 seconds. Plus, the i5 managed 295 miles in our 70-mph highway range test, far exceeding the official estimate. An 11-kilowatt onboard charger adds about 30 miles of range per hour on a 240-volt home charger.

The ride is pampering, yet the BMW carves precisely through corners with quick steering and minimal body roll. The car's "one-pedal driving" mode is one of the smoothest and easiest-to-use systems we've tested so far.

The front seats are extremely comfortable and supportive. The rear seat has nice padding and good underleg support, but the space is a bit tight. Usability is mixed; we appreciate the clear EV-specific displays, but most climate functions require at least a two-step sequence through the touchscreen. We also don't like the awkward interior door latches.

MIDSIZED LUXURY CARS

## Mercedes-Benz E-Class

Lots of Luxury but Distracting Controls

**64** OVERALL SCORE

**ROAD-TEST SCORE** 88

**HIGHS** Smooth ride, sharp handling, short stopping distances, quiet cabin, comfortable front seats, high-quality materials

**LOWS** Distracting controls

**POWERTRAIN** 255-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged 4-cylinder engine; 9-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive

**FUEL** 28 mpg on premium

**PRICE** $62,300-$68,100 base price
+ $1,050 destination charge
**Total MSRP as tested** $77,740

**MERCEDES-BENZ** has bolstered its E-Class with a smoother ride, sharper handling, and improved fuel economy. Unfortunately, it's saddled with frustrating controls. Some testers looked beyond them, with one calling the car "lovely." But another shared a more common sentiment, calling it "a pain."

Starting with the "lovely" parts, the base 255-hp, turbo four-cylinder in our tested E350 provides strong midrange torque, and the transmission shifts smoothly. It's both quick and efficient, managing a commendable 28 mpg overall. But we don't like the engine stop/start system's long delay of power when getting going again.

Handling is engaging and capable, whether on a curvy highway, a twisty back road, or around our track. The E-Class dives into corners enthusiastically, and we appreciate the steering's decent feedback. It's a capable long-distance cruiser, too, with a comfortable and composed ride. The cabin stays hushed, beyond some minor growliness from the turbo-four at lower revs.

The cabin is full of stitched leather, tasteful chrome, and matte-finish wood. We appreciate the way the front seats coddle occupants, but it's annoying that you have to adjust the lumbar through a screen. The rear seat benefits from plush padding, but headroom is tight for taller passengers.

The controls aren't at all user-friendly. Instead of knobs and buttons, the car has touch-sensitive sliders for climate, audio, and cruise control. They're hard to master and require extra focus while driving.

PHOTOS: JOHN POWERS/CONSUMER REPORTS

MIDSIZED THREE-ROW SUVs

## Hyundai Santa Fe/Hybrid

Frugal Family Haulers

**75** OVERALL SCORE

**ROAD-TEST SCORE** 82

**HIGHS** Comfortable ride, roomy second row, generous cargo area

**LOWS** Uneven power delivery, tight third-row seat

**POWERTRAIN** 277-hp, 2.5-liter turbo 4-cylinder engine; 8-speed dual-clutch automatic; all-wheel drive

**FUEL** 24 mpg on regular

**PRICE** $33,950-$48,300 base price + $1,415 destination charge
**Total MSRP as tested** $40,465

**84** OVERALL SCORE

**ROAD-TEST SCORE** 94

**HIGHS** Excellent fuel economy, comfortable ride, short stops, roomy second row, generous cargo area

**LOWS** Tight third-row seat

**POWERTRAIN** 231-hp, 1.6-liter turbo 4-cylinder hybrid; 6-speed automatic transmission; AWD

**FUEL** 34 mpg on regular

**PRICE** $36,950-$48,800 base price + $1,415 destination charge
**Total MSRP as tested** $40,145

**THE REDESIGNED** Santa Fe falls neatly between most compact and midsized SUVs while still having a standard third-row seat. We tested a conventional model and the hybrid. The regular one did well because of its maneuverable size, excellent outward visibility, good handling, comfortable seats, and generous cargo capacity. But the hybrid performed exceptionally, notching a stellar road-test score that topped all of its competitors.

It's a tale of two powertrains: The 277-hp, 2.5-liter turbocharged four-cylinder in the regular Santa Fe has abundant verve, but it's marred by hesitation during rolling stops, followed by an abrupt burst of power. In parking lots, you can feel the clutches slipping in an effort to be gentle, but the result is some jerkiness. The hybrid—which uses a smaller turbo-four with a conventional six-speed automatic—is much smoother, thanks to a shove of electric power off the line. But where the hybrid really shines is in fuel economy; it managed an excellent 34 mpg overall vs. the regular Santa Fe's 24 mpg in our testing, without a purchase price penalty.

In most other ways, the two mirror each other. That includes confident and capable handling and an absorbent ride. Most testers found the front seats comfortable and the driving position spacious. The second-row seat is quite roomy; the tight third row is nice to have in a pinch. The 46 cubic feet of cargo volume outpacks some larger SUVs.

The controls are easy to use, with physical buttons and knobs for functions like adjusting the temperature and the audio volume and tuning.

LUXURY ELECTRIC CARS

## Tesla Model 3

Smoother Ride, Quieter Cabin

**73** OVERALL SCORE

**ROAD-TEST SCORE** 83

**HIGHS** Quick acceleration, short stopping distances, agile handling, comfortable front seats, access to the Tesla Supercharger network

**LOWS** Distracting controls, no Android Auto or Apple CarPlay

**POWERTRAIN** 394-hp, dual electric motors; 1-speed direct drive; all-wheel drive

**RANGE** 334 miles

**PRICE** $38,990-$54,990 base price + $1,390 destination charge
**Total MSRP as tested** $48,380

**A MAJOR FRESHENING** for the Model 3 brings a quieter cabin, improved interior materials, a smoother ride, and an 8-inch climate and infotainment touchscreen for rear passengers. But as one of our testers said, "It may have spectacular performance, but it's an ergonomic nightmare."

That's because most interior tasks—including shifting gears and adjusting the dash vents and side mirrors—are handled through the 15.4-inch touchscreen. The EV also forgoes steering column stalks, so the turn signals, horn, and wipers are controlled via buttons on the steering wheel.

But almost everything else about the Model 3 is spot-on. While the ride is now slightly smoother, handling remains pinpoint sharp. With nearly 400 hp available almost instantly, it's super-quick, zipping from 0 to 60 mph in just 4.3 seconds. The tuning of the accelerator pedal and regenerative-braking system makes the car fairly easy to drive smoothly. That's a good thing: Unlike in many EVs, the level of the regenerative braking isn't adjustable.

We recorded 334 miles during our 70-mph highway range test, which is on the longer side. Home charging on a 240-volt circuit is fast, with about 44 miles of range added per hour.

The front seats are comfortable, and the driving position gives a commanding view forward. The rear seat is a sore point; space is tight, the seatback is very upright, and there's little underleg support.

Tiny red LEDs at the base of the windshield pillars form a token BSW system, but RCTW still isn't available.



**Safety Term Glossary: AEB** automatic emergency braking; **BSW** blind spot warning; **LDW** lane departure warning; **LKA** lane keeping assistance; **RCTW** rear cross traffic warning.

**Ratings** › **A Fine Mix** This month we tested two refined EVs, a luxurious and sporty Mercedes-Benz sedan, and regular and hybrid versions of the very functional Hyundai Santa Fe SUV.

| Make + Model | Overall Score | Price | Survey Results | | Road-Test Results | | | | | | | | | | ADAS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Predicted reliability | Owner satisfaction | Road-test score | Overall mpg | CR range, miles | Seat comfort, front/rear | Usability | Noise | Ride | Fit + finish | Routine handling | Acceleration, 0-60 mph, sec. | Dry braking, 60-0 mph, ft. | BSW/RCTW |
| **LUXURY ELECTRIC CARS** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ✓ **BMW i5** | 86 | $91,695 | | | 94 | NA | 295 | | | | | | | 3.5 | 125 | S |
| ✓ **BMW i4** | 83 | $73,245 | | | 91 | NA | 318 | | | | | | | 3.5 | 129 | S |
| ✓ **Hyundai Ioniq 6** | 83 | $52,975 | | | 84 | NA | 265 | | | | | | | 4.6 | 130 | S |
| ✓ **Tesla Model 3** | 73 | $48,380 | | | 83 | NA | 334 | | | | | | | 4.3 | 123 | S / – |
| **Tesla Model S** | 63 | $92,690 | | | 86 | NA | 366 | | | | | | | 3.2 | 125 | – |
| **Mercedes-Benz EQE** | 59 | $80,210 | | | 84 | NA | 332 | | | | | | | 5.5 | 121 | S |
| **MIDSIZED LUXURY CARS** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ✓ **BMW 530i** 2.0T | 83 | $71,545 | | | 91 | 29 | 465 | | | | | | | 6.6 | 122 | S |
| ✓ **Audi A6** 2.0T | 77 | $59,390 | | | 91 | 26 | 505 | | | | | | | 6.8 | 129 | O |
| ✓ **Genesis G80** 2.5T | 74 | $56,920 | | | 86 | 24 | 455 | | | | | | | 6.8 | 128 | S |
| **Mercedes-Benz E350** 2.0T | 64 | $77,740 | | | 88 | 28 | 485 | | | | | | | 6.7 | 124 | S |
| **MIDSIZED THREE-ROW SUVs** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ✓ **Toyota Highlander Hybrid** 2.5H | 85 | $47,595 | | | 86 | 35 | 590 | | | | | | | 8.0 | 141 | S |
| ✓ **Kia Telluride** 3.8L | 84 | $40,855 | | | 92 | 21 | 390 | | | | | | | 7.2 | 127 | S |
| ✓ **Hyundai Santa Fe Hybrid** 1.6T+H | 84 | $40,145 | | | 94 | 34 | 605 | | | | | | | 7.9 | 129 | S |
| ✓ **Hyundai Palisade** 3.8L | 83 | $43,415 | | | 85 | 21 | 395 | | | | | | | 7.1 | 132 | S |
| ✓ **Mazda CX-90** 3.3T | 82 | $48,670 | | | 85 | 24 | 435 | | | | | | | 7.2 | 128 | S |
| ✓ **Toyota Highlander** 2.4T | 80 | $46,328 | | | 82 | 22 | 400 | | | | | | | 7.7 | 133 | S |
| ✓ **Subaru Ascent** 2.4T | 79 | $43,867 | | | 90 | 22 | 420 | | | | | | | 8.0 | 129 | O |
| ✓ **Kia Sorento Hybrid** 1.6T+H | 77 | $40,975 | | | 86 | 28 | 500 | | | | | | | 8.1 | 132 | S |
| ✓ **Honda Pilot** 3.5L | 77 | $50,240 | | | 85 | 21 | 380 | | | | | | | 7.7 | 129 | S |
| ✓ **Hyundai Santa Fe** 2.5T | 75 | $40,465 | | | 82 | 24 | 415 | | | | | | | 6.7 | 131 | S |
| ✓ **Kia Sorento** 2.5T | 72 | $38,725 | | | 82 | 25 | 435 | | | | | | | 6.5 | 133 | S |
| **Nissan Pathfinder** 3.5L | 62 | $46,375 | | | 81 | 21 | 385 | | | | | | | 7.6 | 138 | S |
| **Volkswagen Atlas** 2.0T | 60 | $47,121 | | | 78 | 20 | 360 | | | | | | | 7.7 | 124 | S |
| **Ford Explorer** 2.3T | 60 | $49,940 | | | 74 | 21 | 370 | | | | | | | 7.4 | 136 | S |

› Digital and All Access members can find the latest, complete ratings at CR.org/cars. When you're ready to buy, configure the vehicle and find the best price in your area by clicking the green "View Pricing Information" button on the model's dedicated page.

**HOW WE TEST:** The **Overall Score** combines **road-test results,** survey data for **predicted reliability** and **owner satisfaction,** and **advanced safety,** which includes crash-test results and the availability of crash-prevention features, such as automatic emergency braking, pedestrian detection, blind spot warning, and rear cross traffic warning. A dash (–) means no such safety system is offered; O means it's optional on at least some trim levels; S means the feature is standard on all trims. We deduct points if a model's active driving assistance system has inadequate direct driver monitoring.

WORSE — BETTER | ✓ CR RECOMMENDED | CR GREEN CHOICE

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# The Better Deal

Many of the products we test at CR earn high ratings for their impressive performance—but some are also a really great value. They have most (if not all) of the attributes of other top-rated products at a much lower price. Check out the deals we found for you this month.

## CARRY-ON LUGGAGE

### BRIGGS & RILEY ESSENTIAL 22" SPINNER

$660 79

### TRAVELPRO MAXLITE 5 21" SPINNER

$145 80

### THE LOWDOWN

**BOTH CARRY-ON BAGS** impressed us. CR's testers found the Briggs & Riley a little easier to open, close, and load, while the Travelpro scored well for safety, with no sharp edges or handle pinch points. The Briggs & Riley offers more features: It has five handle positions, an extra interior pocket, a security lock, and a lifetime warranty. But it's much heavier than the Travelpro—10.3 pounds vs. 5.5 pounds—and costs nearly five times as much.

## BATTERY HANDHELD LEAF BLOWERS

### MAKITA GBU01M1

$390 85

### EGO LB6151

$200 85

### THE LOWDOWN

**YOU CAN'T GO WRONG** with either of these excellent battery handheld leaf blowers. Both chase leaves away with exceptional speed and are easy to handle. There are some small distinctions between the two models. In our tests, the Ego loosened embedded leaf particles from a lawn a bit faster, while CR's owner surveys have shown the Makita brand to be a little more reliable. (It's worth noting, however, that the Ego has a five-year warranty; the Makita's is only three years.) The biggest difference is the price: The Makita costs nearly twice as much as the Ego.

## BATHROOM SCALES

### ESCALI HIGH CAPACITY ANTI-SLIP HC225W

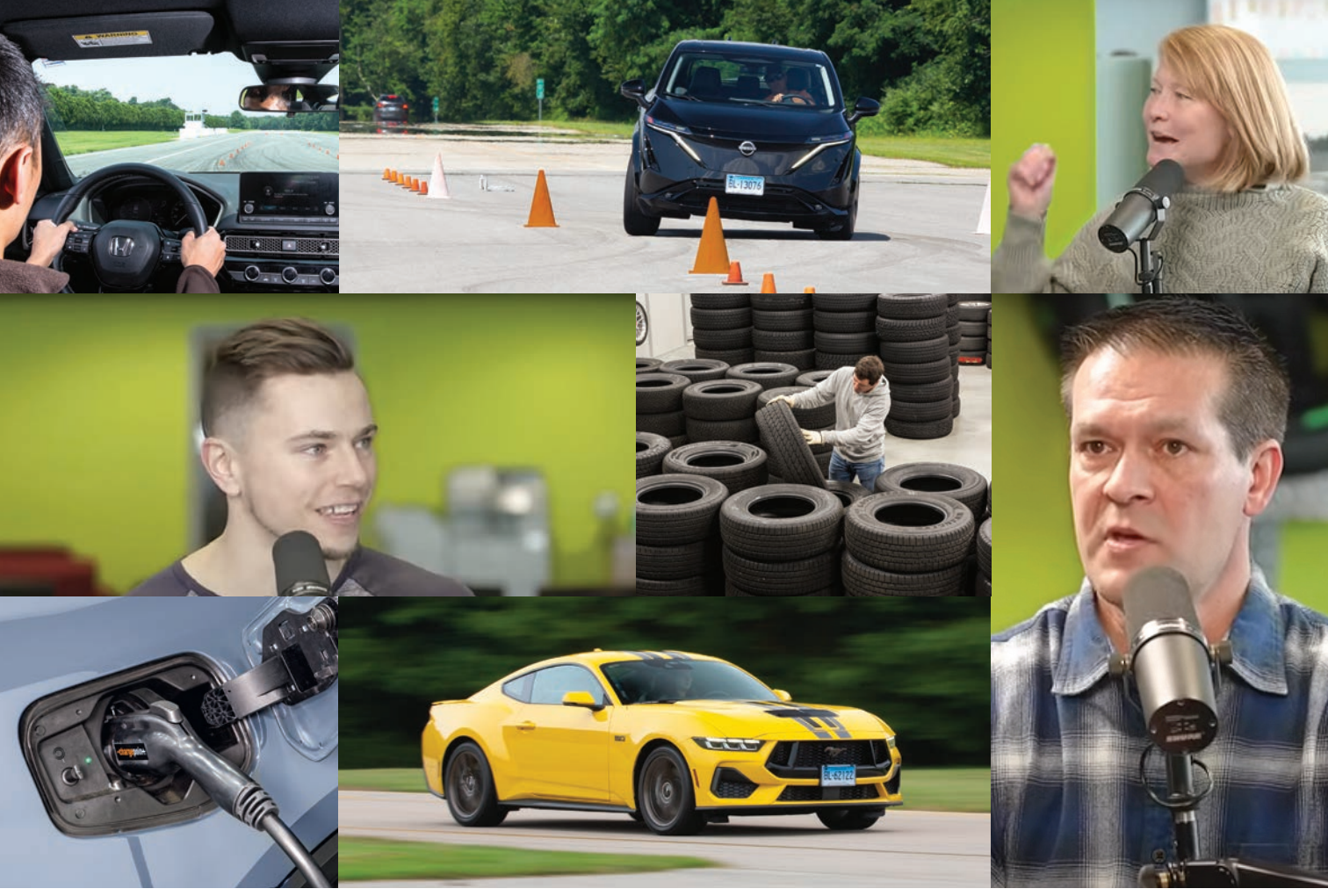
$50 92

### VITAFIT DIGITAL BODY WEIGHT VT1703U

$18 90

### THE LOWDOWN

**THE ESCALI AND VITAFIT** both deliver accurate, consistent results. The Escali is better at showing the correct weight, even when the user isn't perfectly balanced on the scale. It has a larger display, a higher weight capacity, and a lifetime warranty. But the Vitafit is also accurate for less than half the price.



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